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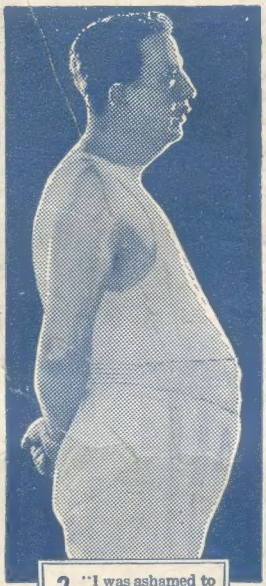

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3. "Then I slipped on a Weil Belt...a transformation took place... what a difference—pounds seemed to have fallen away!"

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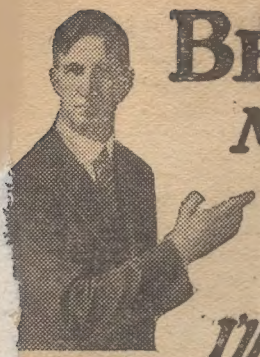

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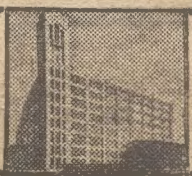

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THRILLING RANCH STORIES

Vol. I, No. 1 G. B. FARNUM, *Editor* November, 1933

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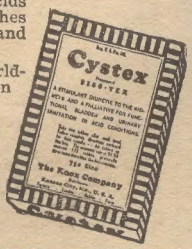

Because of its amazing and almost world-wide success the Doctor's Prescription known as Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex) is offered to sufferers from Poor Kidney and Bladder functions under a fair-play guarantee to fix you up to your complete satisfaction or money back on return of empty package. It's only 3 cents a dose. So ask your druggist for Cystex today and see for yourself how much younger, stronger and better you can feel by simply cleaning our your Kidneys. Cystex must do the work or cost you nothing.

New York Doctor Praises Cystex

Dr. N. T. ABDOU
New York Physician

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Former Police Reporter in Chicago, New York and Boston. Author of "What Happens to Innocent Girls," "How Girls Go Wrong," etc.

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Let's get going, waddies.

The Editor

Romance Rides

A Thrilling Complete Book-Length Novel of Two Brave Hearts Fighting Their Way to Happiness Along the White Sands of San Christobal

By ROBERT DALE DENVER

Author of "Masquerade Mesa," "The Girl From Texas," etc.

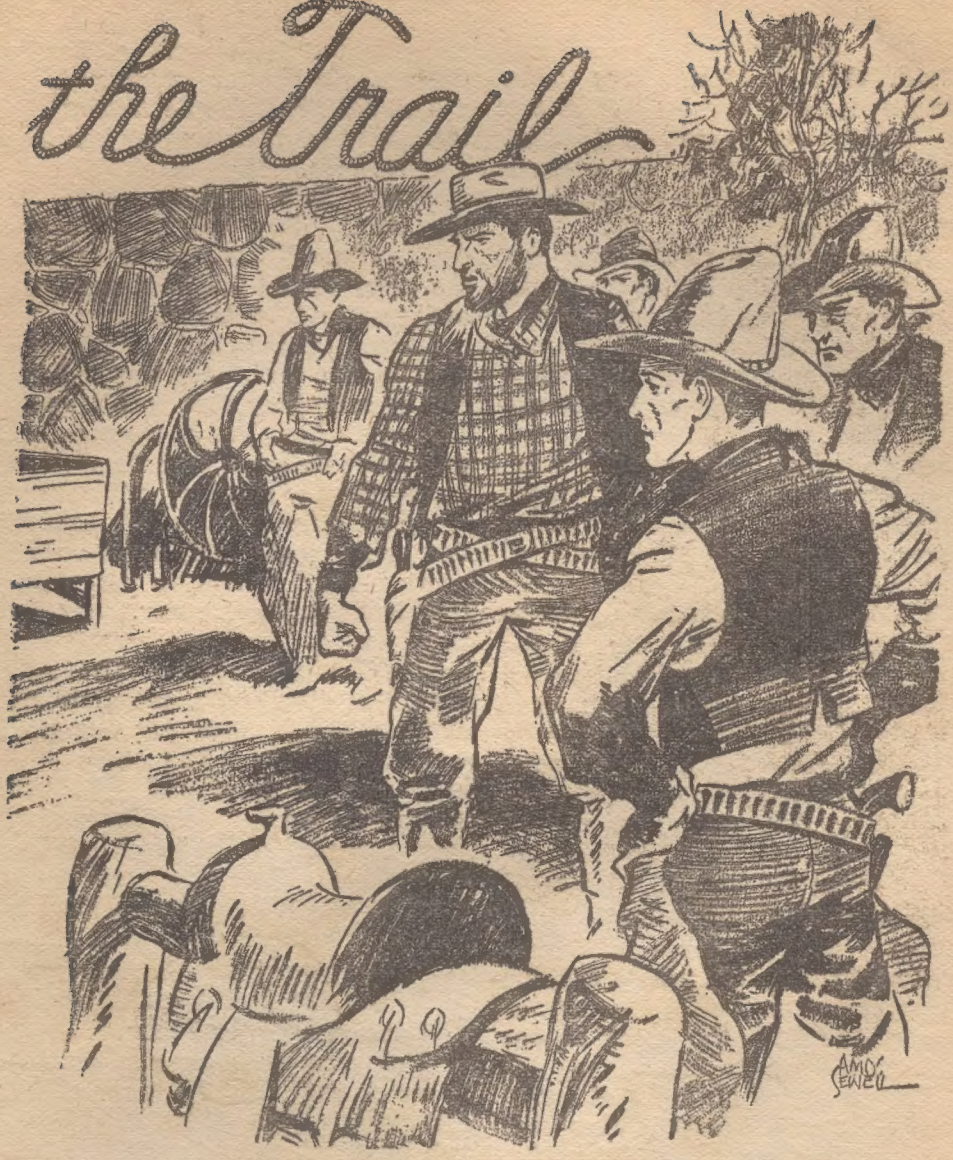
CHAPTER I

RANGELAND RACKET

FROM the dust-gray rattler coiled below the ocatilla lances came an angry whir. "Smoke" Darrell's *grulla* cow pony shied, lunged far to the side. The weight of the tall rider remained in easy balance, while his hand whipped down to his holster. A black-stocked gun slid up. In the cowboy's hand it represented a menace far more deadly than the needle fangs of the diamond-back.

With the swift draw Smoke Darrell had thumbed back the hammer. Now, lightning-like, the gun tilted down at the deadly coils—only to be suddenly slipped back into leather.

the Trail



"No cartridges to waste, old-timer, on snakes," he muttered to his horse. "Not on the kind that crawl."

Horse and rider had just topped a rocky rise covered with a jungle of palm-like yucca. The cowboy's chill gray eyes swept the San Christobal, the great desert valley which lay between the walls of two distant mountain ranges.

Sand and cactus and thorny shrubs — thousands of unbroken acres—lay under the pitiless glare of a sun that blistered and baked this land to grayness. Save toward the west where, a sight astonishing to the eye, lay a shimmering white line, a great low mesa, snow-colored, extending for miles in a line parallel to the mountain range.

Nine people out of ten would have forgotten a heat registering over a

hundred degrees in the shade and sworn that the white was snow. Smoke Darrell knew better. It was a finely-ground deposit of gypsum, piled like the dunes of a wind-swept seashore. The White Sands of San Christobal.

A moment the rider's eyes lingered on the white line of the sands, then they dropped to the arroyo bottom below. Darrell leaned forward in sudden astonishment. Crawling up the sandy trough of the arroyo were two wagons, heavily loaded. each drawn by four mules. Following them came a herd of cattle, strung out far down the winding arroyo bottom.

HE stared unbelievingly, but to add to the testimony of his eyes was the rumble of the wagons, softened by the heavy sand. The leaders of the herd marched slowly by him, swinging along wearily, wrapped in a coiling cloud of choking dust. The point man rode a little ahead, followed by flanking riders along the line, all with neckerchiefs muffling their faces.

The nearest of these to Darrell was a slender youth with a crimson neckerchief over his face, sitting his bay mount with the grace of one born to the saddle.

Unseen behind his cover of yucca, Smoke Darrell watched them—the riders yelling hoarsely at the cattle, swinging their ropes, hazing the herd across this burning waterless hell waste of the San Christobal. The signs were plain. Those white-face cattle were dying on their feet —from thirst. The weaker staggered as they walked, near utter collapse. All had been pushed nearly to the limit of their strength.

Up ahead the two wagons had stopped. The point man had ridden up to indicate a spot in the arroyo bottom. The two drivers took spades and began a frantic digging, plainly for water.

The herd halted, and two of the trail drivers rode up to join the digging men. They all took turns sinking a hole down deep into the dry sand. They had no luck evidently, Darrell saw, as he kept to the cover of the jungle of mesquite and soapweed to drift nearer.

Smoke Darrell had a faraway look in his eyes. He was looking not at something that was happening before him, but at a scene that he had witnessed long ago. Ten years before another cattle herd dying of thirst had passed close to this very spot, and a man had showed them where to dig. But they had not found water. Nor did these people.

The digging stopped. Two men stepped a little apart, one a stocky, oldish cowman with an iron-gray walrus mustache. The other, who had been on point and who had chosen the spot to dig for water, was younger, a dark-faced whipstock fellow. Two guns were slung low on his hips. Darrell was so close that he could hear their talk.

I DONE the best I could," maintained the younger man.

"Yuh done the best yuh could—to wreck us!" rasped out the oldish cattleman. "I'm thinkin', Moore, yuh hired out as our guide so's yuh could lead us in this hell hole and let my herd die of thirst."

"But I tell yuh," insisted the other, "this is the first time I saw these water holes dry. Yore only hope now, Malone, is to make the Rawls ranch—up ahead, on the edge of the White Sands. Rawls has plenty water. Don't yell before yo're hurt."

The whipstock younger man was a gunman, Darrell knew, the kind of man that practises a swift

draw for hours at a time, and burns up dozens of boxes of cartridges.

One of the teamsters stepped over, a little chunk of a bearded fellow. "Boss," he said, "I heerd of that Rawls ranch. I heerd a story years ago of a herd like yores, lost in a desert, dyin' o' thirst, that pushed up to a Rawls ranch and ast for water.

"An' this Rawls he only laughed and said, 'No water for strangers; but I'll pay a dollar a head for the herd.' An' the herd owner had to take it, or see his cows die. Boss, yo're right; this Moore hombre yuh hired as guide was paid by Rawls to lead us intuh this hell hole."

THE oldish cattleman turned to the tall guide. "What yuh say to that, Moore?" he rasped out.

A grin, a hideous, wolfish lifting of the lips, appeared on the face of the man with the two guns, Moore.

"Here's yore answer, Malone!" he snapped, and then it came without warning—the lightning-like flash of his hands down to his pair of guns. They swept up, hammers back, one barrel to cover the accusing teamster, the other the herd owner, Malone, and the two men standing near him. "Yore answer's in here, in the shape of lead for that old buzzard teamster that's sayin' I ever pulled a double-cross."

The men about the dry hole were caught off guard. None of them had thought it necessary to wear a gun on the slow, dragging drive across this desert country. Their glances toward one of the wagons told the location of their weapons. The little bearded teamster who had boldly accused Moore of treachery knew he faced certain death for it, even though the guide was delaying firing the shot, getting a certain pleasure out of playing with his victims.

The delay gave the teamster his chance at life, for in those few moments his boss, Malone, had time to act. He used the trick that is the oldest in the gunman's list. Fixedly he stared over the gunman's shoulder at an imaginary man. "Wait, Sandy!" he ordered. "Don't shoot the coyote in the back!"

The trick somehow fooled the gunman. Startled, he turned his head to look back over his left shoulder, and as he did so, the unarmed Malone sprang toward him. Hearing the footsteps, realizing he had been tricked, the guide shot hastily, one gun spurting lead and flame at the teamster, the other at the oldish cattleman.

The one bullet sailed far wide of the teamster; the other struck the herd owner in the center of the forehead, killing him instantly. He bent at the knees and went down as if he were tired and meant to go to sleep. Snarling, the gunman backed behind the wagon out of Darrell's view, edging toward his horse as he held the others covered.

It had all happened in split seconds. Darrell, yards away and behind his screen of brush on the hill, had been helpless to interfere. The guide had drawn his guns unexpectedly, and a shot sent from Darrell's own weapon into the swiftly-moving group of men would have been as likely to hit one as another.

THE killer from behind the wagon flung two more shots at the men, and made a wild grab for his horse. The animal pulled away, but Moore, cursing him, made another lunge, got the reins and swung aboard with the speed of a relay racer making a change. It was high time. The men as he mounted raced for the wagon to get their guns. As Moore spurred for cover, one of them snatched a rifle from under a bedroll and leveled it.

Glancing back, the rider saw his danger and twisted around in his saddle to throw back a hasty shot. It struck the side of the wagon, knocking splinters in the eyes of the rifleman and making his shot go wild. The next instant Moore was out of sight, crashing through a thick growth of desert brush and around a sharp bend in the arroyo.

Behind him the scattered riders swept into their saddles to go in pursuit, after stopping at the lead wagon to yank rifles from under bedrolls. So intent were they on vengeance that they had ignored the danger of one of their number.

THE last of the shots sent back by the fugitive had struck the bay horse ridden by the slim youth with the silk crimson neckerchief. The horse reared high, pawed the air a moment, and then went over backward. Darrell saw the slim youth slide from under the saddle just in time. But the rider had dismounted on a little slope. Now slipping on a loose rock, he fell within the arcs made by the threshing hoofs of the dying horse.

Smoke Darrell gave a great shout, spurred his *grulla* to the speed of a race horse getting away from the wire. Leaning far down, his right hand snatched at the collar of the fallen rider, held, and dragged him from danger.

One hoof as he hauled the youth away struck glancingly on the small high-heeled boot. There was a little scream of pain. Astonished by the cry, Darrell got down and put a propping arm under the rider. The big brown sombrero had fallen off, revealing a thick mass of curly reddish hair. A girl this, with long-lashed blue eyes, a mouth that was one soft, warm curve. Slim, slender, hard-muscled—but a girl, startlingly pretty in her range clothes.

"I'm all right," she said in a matter-of-fact way. "Thanks for the buggy ride." She sprang to her feet, jammed down the hat over her rebellious curls and ran toward the rancher who lay on the ground as he had fallen. On the way she changed her course, went instead to the wagon. Two boys, in age approximately ten and fourteen, had ridden up, were lifting out a pair of rifles.

"You boys stay here," she ordered. "You're too young. Either the men will get that killer or they won't." She went on to the rancher, reached him just as Darrell was kneeling to examine the dead man. The girl knelt on the other side; tears sprang suddenly into her blue eyes.

"Your father?" asked Darrell.

"My uncle. Jim Malone. He is —was the father of these two boys. 'Big Casino' and 'Little Casino' we call them. Their mother died two years ago."

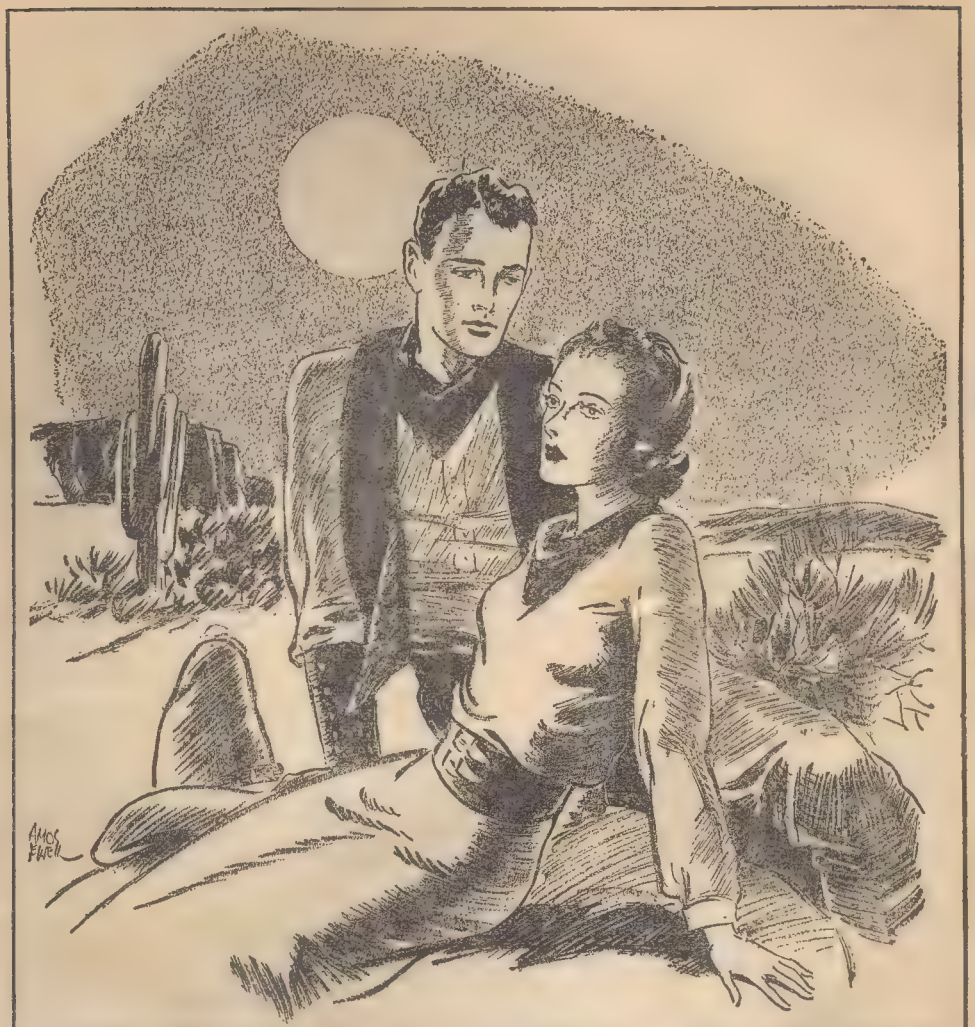
A few shots sounded up ahead; yells came back faintly. The rancher lay in the sun, looking up at the sky from sightless eyes. Behind them the weary, thirst-racked cattle bellowed mournfully under the furnace-like heat that flowed down on them from the glistening White Sands.

A VAST pity rose in Smoke Darrell, for this girl and the two boys, one that wiped out memory even of the grim errand that had brought him to the San Christobal country.

"What do you aim to do, Miss?"

"I don't know. What can we do?"

"There's nothing you can do," said Smoke Darrell. "Your cattle will never make it back out of here. The only water they could possibly reach is this Rawls' ranch. Ma'am, your uncle got lured into a trap. It's as the old rider said, a regular



"You're in a tough place, Miss Malone," he said. "If I can help out any, I'll do it. And I think I can."

racket—having a guide bring cattle into this desert.

"Rawls has got too many fighting men for you to take water by force, and the law is with him in protecting his property. Yore uncle was killed to throw the fear of God into the rest of you. You'll have to go on to the Rawls place and sell the herd to him. There's no way out I know of, and I've scouted this country for the last couple of weeks."

"And if it were your herd?"

The gray eyes of the cowboy suddenly glinted. "I'd fight—if it was my herd. Fight—like the owners of another herd that come into this trap once done. But you've got no chance, not a girl and two young boys and the few men you've got. Not against Buck Rawls. He'll make you an offer for yore cows that's the same as stealin' 'em. And there's nothing you can do but accept."

"How about the sheriff? There must be some law here."

"Not the kind that'll stick up for

strangers — against Buck Rawls. What can the law do? You either take his offer or yore herd dies of thirst. You can't fight."

The soft mouth lost its curve. "We'll drive on to this Rawls ranch. But when we get there, we'll fight."

"I like your sand," said Darrell frankly. "What's your name?"

"Cherry Malone."

"Cherry Malone, I reckon you're in for a heap of trouble. But don't make it worse; sell out to Rawls. He's got you any way you turn."

He looked at the dead man again and at the two small boys. "I've come to this country on a sort of job that I been plannin' to do ever since I was Big Casino's age. Yore men are coming back, so I'll be ridin' along. I can't afford to be seen by too many people in here." The hard look set again on his face.

He stepped on his horse, said "*Adios.*" The girl thoughtfully looked after him until he vanished into the yuccas.

Old Dick Rutledge and Sandy Starr were galloping back to the wagons, their faces carrying news of their failure to avenge the murder of Jim Malone, cowman.

The girl lifted her shoulders as if already the burden of her new responsibilities weighed heavily on them. Jim Malone had to be buried and the herd had to move on to the nearest water—Buck Rawls' ranch. She had a sudden wish—that the grave-faced young stranger were riding with them.

CHAPTER II

The Bullet Passport

SMOKE DARRELL stopped on the hill above the Malone herd to take a final look—and remained there for long minutes. He could see the band of the crimson neckerchief which marked Cherry Malone's slender figure.

Smoke Darrell was fighting a hard battle with himself. He had come to the San Christobal country with one set purpose, one that had been a part of him for ten years. And a man does not easily let himself be swerved from a ten-year-old purpose.

The Malones were strangers; what happened to their herd was none of his business. And yet against that cold fact was the girl in the crimson neckerchief, left to carry a burden that was too much for a man. And the two sturdy youngsters, Big Casino and Little Casino, cowboys in the making, standing looking at their father, fighting back their tears. As Smoke Darrell had stood ten years before—

HE took from a chaps pocket a cartridge, a .44 caliber bullet, with the lead nose of it gashed by a knife. Slowly he turned it over in his hand. It was a passport, a passport to the outlaw kingdom of Buck Rawls, a grim identification that would take him safely into the circle of Rawls' gunmen.

The hard-bitten cowboy hated to use it, disdaining with a proud independence to take an easy advantage of his sworn enemies. But to assist a girl and two boys, he would feel justified in using it—if he decided to help them.

It took him two brown-paper cigarettes to decide. Standing up, he ground beneath his high-heeled boot the cigarette butt, a habit of safeguarding against fire he had learned in the grass country of Montana. The bullet he put back into his chaps pocket, buttoning the flap securely over it.

Before he again mounted he did a strange thing: he pulled from his

grulla mount the shoes of his horse. From his pair of alforjas he took another set of shoes, shoes worn thin with use. The discarded ones whose calks he had bent in certain ways easy to remember, he buried at the base of a huge barrel cactus.

They had served their purpose; he had left tracks that Rawls' riders could easily identify. If he turned up at the ranch riding a horse with that set of shoes, Rawls' sharp-eyed gunmen would know he was the same lone rider whose tracks they had noticed on their range.

His horse's hoofs thudded away under the hot glare of the setting sun, pounding straight toward the Rawls ranch. In something over two hours he traveled the distance which the Malone herd, even moving all night, would not cover until late the next day.

AT sunset he was looking down on the ranch of Buck Rawls. He had watched it often during the past weeks, had studied it with field glasses, observing the comings and goings of its people, until he knew every rider by sight.

The building was low, long, made of blocks of black rock from a formation that cropped up here close to the edge of the White Sands. Against the background of the white snow of the mesa behind it, the ranch had a strange, weird look. About it were square stone corrals, for not a stick of wood grew within many miles. Enclosed also in black rock walls was a huge square reservoir, its stored water gleaming red in the sky's afterglow.

Built like a fort, on closer inspection the house gave an even stronger impression of a building designed to resist a siege. The windows were so small as to be almost slit-like.

As Darrell rode up to the house, he passed the corrals of black stone, which were arranged to be in an emergency flanking fortifications against enemy attacks.

He was some fifty yards from the house when a huge dog, built like a mastiff, black, short-haired, tore savagely toward him. Darrell instead of drawing his gun as was his first impulse, swiftly unbuckled the strap that held his rope.

A LOOP swished out, dropped around the giant body of the dog as he lunged for the *grulla's* throat. The hard twist Manila tightened, swept the animal from its feet, where he stayed as Darrell's horse struck into a trot which kept the dog bouncing along the ground after him.

Someone opened the door, a heavy plank affair with an inner sheathing of iron. The man who stepped out was short, with shoulders that filled the door frame, a small round head and eyes that were like round lead pellets.

Scowlingly he eyed Darrell as he rode up; then his glance wandered over the horse, trying to identify the animal. From one of the narrow windows on his left flank the rider caught the glint of a rifle barrel. Darrell grinned crookedly.

"Damn hospitable bunch you are," he growled.

"An' yuh don't like our hospitality?" snarled the round head.

"Not one damn bit," said Darrell curtly. "I'm here on business—with Buck Rawls. Call off yore ugly hound before I put a bullet through his skull. He loosened his rope and flicked it off the dog's body. The round-headed man shouted at the beast, drove him away.

Another man stepped into the doorway. "Who's askin' for Rawls?" he demanded. This was a hawk-nosed fellow with a reddish stubble

of beard, fifty or so, with eyes shadowed by heavy brows which had been bleached white by the wind and sun glare. At least six feet three inches, powerfully-built, with a brace of guns at his hips, Buck Rawls was fit owner of this fortress-like place.

"Rawls?" asked Darrell curtly. "I'd like a word with you alone."

Two other men appeared behind Rawls. As the rancher stepped out, they followed to examine the tracks of Darrell's horse.

ONE of them shook his head. "It ain't him," he said.

"That's lucky for you," said Rawls to Smoke. "There's been a hombre hangin' around here, mebbe spyin' on us. We ain't had sight of him, but we got a few looks at his horse's tracks."

"Couldn't be me," drawled Darrell. "I come here from a town west of the White Sands. Mogador," he added.

Rawls started a little. "Mogador, eh?" he said. "Tie up that damn' dog, Torp." He walked out close to the rider who began building a cigarette. "And what word do yuh bring from Mogador?"

Darrell deliberately finished rolling his brown-paper cylinder, lit it and then put his hand into the left pocket of his batwing chaps. It came out closed, and slid something into the outstretched hand of Rawls.

The rancher turned his back to the others and inspected the contents of his hand. A .44 cartridge, with the nose of the bullet gashed across.

His eyes narrowed again. "Light," he said. "What's yore name?"

"'Smoke' they call me," drawled the stranger. "And Smoke is about as far as I care to go in the way of names."

Rawls' hostility faded. "Room for your horse in the lower corral, an' we got some hay and oats in the saddle shed. What's doin' at Mogador?"

"What would be doing in yore line, Rawls, except cows?" returned Darrell. "A herd of black Angus bein' drove out of the Puerco drought country, lookin' for grass. Six hundred head. 'Bull' Lyons says if it's rigged right, yuh'll have black cows to graze up against those White Sands. Yuh wouldn't object to that, I reckon?

"I'll talk it over with yuh an' go back an' report to Lyons. After I rest up a day; crossin' this desert is hard on a horse."

"Six hundred head," repeated Rawls. "Shore, we'll talk it over—figger out a lay." His manner warmed toward his visitor. "We got a bait uh grub in the kitchen; help yoreself. Stick around a couple days. Meanwhile if yuh want to see some fun and mebbe join in it—yuh'll see some 'long toward evenin' tomorrer."

It was the time the Malone herd was due in at the Rawls ranch, if the herders shoved them along fast.

"Fun, eh?" said Darrell. "An' mebbe some Fourth of July fireworks?"

"There might be." And his lips lifted in what was intended for a smile, but was like the snarl of a dog.

A BURNING blast straight from hell's furnace fanned the Malone herd, lifted dust into the red nostrils of the tortured cattle. Occasionally as they moved under the hot sun a low bellowing ran back along the strung-out herd. They were more dead than alive, like a ghost herd, the ghosts of cattle that had moved through this desert and had left their bleached skeletons to mark their trail.

The trail drivers shouted and

swung ropes. Back of them, under the dead arms of a tree cactus, lay the grave of Jim Malone. Big Casino and Little Casino, as sole funeral ceremony for their father, had asked Cherry Malone to sing, the song that Jim Malone had loved most of all. And she had sung it with tears in her eyes, and with her hands clasped tightly in the boys'—the mournful, simple "Home on the Range." That had been in the night, under a full moon.

As she had finished, a coyote had yapped from the hill above the bedground of the exhausted cattle, as if he already scented meat from carcasses that would be left behind. Big Casino had wiped his eyes; Little Casino had sobbed openly. The old-timers had turned away to hide eyes suddenly moist.

AND then after a rest the herd had shambled on, through the night, through the day. A few of them fell and remained for the coyotes. Those that went on were little more than alive.

At noon when they rested again, old Sandy Starr came to the girl. "They orphaned the boys and reckon they ain't done yit," he said. "Me and some of the rest was raised with yore Uncle Jim. The strings of us old-timers is 'bout played out, Cherry. We got nothin' much to lose. Why don't you and the boys ride back and wait? We'll make out ag'in this *cultus* Rawls somehow."

Deeply touched by the offer, she shook her head determinedly. They were on a forlorn hope, but they would stick together.

"I don't see no way out," said Sandy Starr disconsolately.

The only youthful rider in the group, outside of Cherry and Big and Little Casino, came up swaggeringly. A distant relative of the Malones, he had joined the drive at the last minute.

His last name was Tolliver and the men had promptly given him a first one—"Windy." Big-faced, big-bodied, lazy, he had been more of a hindrance than a help on the trail. He counted himself a lady-killer, and several times during the drive the girl had been forced to repulse his clumsy advances.

"What you mean—no way out?" blustered Windy. "Cherry, I want to speak to yuh. I kin git yuh outa this."

She stepped aside, prepared to listen to some braggart solution of their difficulties. "What I've got to say is this, Cherry; promise to marry me, and I'll guarantee this herd will git out o' this mess."

"You feel certain you can get us out?"

His chest swelled. "Yore troubles will be over the minute yuh say 'yes.'" He leaned nearer. "Say, you're so dang sweet, I just can't help takin' a kiss—"

"You do and you'll have your face slapped red," she told him. "Keep your paws off me."

"Aw, lissen," he begged. "Don't be sore. I wanna help yuh. I'm tellin' yuh, I can git yuh outa this fix. But I ain't doin' it for nothin'. I got my price. You got to promise to marry me before I spill it. When we're hooked up, we take over the herd, as guardians for the kids."

CHERRY did not put an ounce of belief in his claim. Windy Tolliver was notorious for making wild statements. She ignored him. There was no way out, except through Rawls who had the only water in this country. The stranger had told her as much. The Malone riders had combed the country for miles around but had seen no sign of water.

Slowly they got under way again,

for the last burning miles of the cruel march to the Rawls ranch. An hour, two; more cattle went down, had to be left. But the wagons were creaking on over the hard ground of a ridge and a driver waved back. The Rawls ranch lay below.

AS the leaders of the herd topped the rise, a curious change ran through them. It was as if they had taken a new lease on life.

The cattle had gotten the faint smell of water, borne on the heated wind. Under its promise they moved along fast, the stronger ones pushing far ahead. As they came nearer to its black rock house and the white sand glimmering beyond, some of the stronger ones managed a swaying trot.

From the corrals a savage barking started up. And from the house men began to file—six, eight, ten, and still others—all carrying rifles.

Drunk with the smell of water, the thirst-maddened brutes pushed by the point man plunged toward the stone reservoir with its walls that rose some five feet above the surrounding ground. The plank troughs outside were supplied by underground pipes which could be opened and shut by a valve worked by an iron wheel.

Those troughs were empty, drained of their last drop. Frantically the cattle put their muzzles into the moist bottoms, crowding in, fighting, pushing, to let their tortured tongues lick at the wet planks.

Cherry Malone rode ahead of the rest of her crew. She was the first to see Rawls' men, sitting on top of the wall, with rifles in their hands, watching the antics of the maddened cattle, grinning at the tortures of the poor brutes.

At one side stood a little group of three men — a bullet-headed, short, heavy-set fellow and a tall hawk-nosed, stubby-whiskered man. And to the girl's sudden astonishment, the third was the young stranger who had pulled her out from under the threshing hoofs of her horse the day before. So he was in this pirate crew, leagued with Buck Rawls. She ignored him, not by so much as a look giving any hint that she even saw him.

Sitting erect in her saddle, the girl rode straight toward the men, holding her rifle over the horn of her saddle.

CHAPTER III

Smoke Steps In

SITTING her spirited sorrel mount as lightly as a thistle, the girl was a tantalizing mixture of angry determination and soft alluring femininity. Despite her heavy leather chaps and man's shirt, she was breath-taking, grace itself. An angry flush dyed her cheeks, lit up her lovely little face, but she handled the rifle as if she knew how to use it—which she did. Her mouth was a firm, straight line, and her blue eyes fairly blazed.

Watching her, the men fell quiet. Even Rawls as his bold gaze drifted over her straightened his shoulders a little to give a greater effect of manliness.

When she spoke her voice seethed with anger. "You, I suppose, are Buck Rawls?"

"You guessed it the first time, little Miss," said Rawls with a bow to show his gallantry. "And may I offer you the hospitality of my ranch, ma'am?"

A cowboy sitting atop the reservoir wall guffawed at this polite speech, but as the girl turned swiftly in her saddle, moving the gun barrel with her, the puncher lost his balance and after frantic windmill-

ings of his arms, tumbled into the tank with a splash. He climbed out dripping, to the jeers of his companions.

The girl looked at the herd crowding around the troughs.

"Water?" asked Rawls, who had followed her gaze. "Why, yes, we have water. But I'm sorry none to spare for herds belongin' to strangers. These here springs we put 'em in at big expense. Yes, ma'am, little lady, at big expense. But if you want a drink, of course, that's a different thing. We wouldn't have you suffer. Permit me. Boys, a cup of water."

THE girl was thirsty. Their coffee at breakfast, a mixture of canned milk and a little alkali water, had been their last drink. The water was torture to look at, but she would not take a drop from the hands of the man whose gunman had killed the father of Little and Big Casino.

Before the contempt in the girl's face, even the thick-headed Rawls squirmed a little. No man as handsome as he believed himself cares to have a pretty woman look at him as if he were too low to crawl under the belly of a snake. His face flushed red beneath the stubble of sandy whiskers.

"Back where I come from," she stated, "you'd be strung up by your neck for doing half as much. To send a gunman to kill an old rancher; leaving his two boys orphans; in order to steal his cattle. You low cur; you wouldn't even make decent coyote bait."

"Look here!" growled Rawls. "I've stood about enough. I didn't come out here to take any lip from even as pretty a mouth as yours. Who asked you to come in here with your ribby herd of thirsty cows? As for them kids, they may be babes in the woods, but they ain't no birds in this desert to put leaves over 'em."

His voice suddenly became wheedling. "Now, look here. You, or Jim Malone rather, played the wrong card in crossin' this San Christobal with a man that didn't know his water holes. Your stack is down to a few lone worthless white chips, but I'll cash 'em. Them cows as they fight out there to lick mud ain't worth the hides on 'em.

"They ain't no man alive would buy that herd, if they couldn't git water here. The White Sands to the east and north. Desert back of you, desert ahead of you, and a herd that couldn't crawl five miles."

"You've got some terms I suppose? What value do you propose to put on those white chips when you cash them in?"

"A dollar apiece for those cows," said Rawls. "Cash on the barrel head. A handsome price."

"They're worth thirty on the hoof, as they are. Jim Malone was offered that much for them back in drouth country."

RAWLS shook his head. "They ain't worth nothin' here without water. What do you say? You're nearest kin of these boys, I understand. You ain't legal guardian, but I reckon what you agreed to would go in court. I want a bill of sale signed by you in behalf of these boys. The courts here realize that things have to be done in a hurry with a trail herd, and they ain't so formal."

"Which means, I reckon, you've got a judge that'll listen to reason and the jingle of your money."

"Maybe I have," admitted Rawls pleasantly.

"And maybe you've got a court that'll listen to reason in the shooting of a woman?" she said. "If so,

here's your chance." Her gun swung on the cowboy who sat by the iron wheel that closed and opened the valve letting water into the watering troughs. "Untrack yourself!" she ordered him curtly.

Her move took them completely by surprise. For a moment they stared in astonishment.

Then, "Stay where you are!" Rawls gruffly ordered his man.

The cowboy hesitated. "I said, get away from that valve!" Cherry snapped, and he obeyed. "Big Casino," she went on, "go over and open that valve. They won't dare shoot you."

Her look passed from man to man, bitter with contempt. This time her glance rested an instant on Smoke Darrell. It should have burned a hole clear through him. But he was not troubled. He seemed to grin a little and then became grave, guessing what opinion the girl had formed about him.

"Go on, Casino." The larger of Jim Malone's boys rode his pony up to the reservoir. The man with the round head, Torp, started forward, and then quailed before the girl's blazing look. Torp glanced back at his boss. It was up to Rawls to handle this situation.

Rawls took one step forward, and then as the gun barrel shifted his way, he also hesitated. "I believe you would shoot, you little wild cat," he growled.

THE bullet-headed man had an idea. At his feet lay a round rock. With his foot he rolled it toward Cherry Malone's horse. It rattled against the front hoof of the sorrel. Startled, the skittish animal jumped to the side. The girl kept her seat, but in the effort to maintain her balance, her rifle barrel dipped.

Before she could raise it again, Rawls had darted in with the speed of a cat, and had seized it. She struggled with him savagely, but compared with his strength, hers was that of a child. He twisted the gun from her hands and drew her from the saddle. For a moment he held her to him.

"Well, the little wild cat has had her claws pulled," he boasted with a chuckle. "And my, how soft and warm this little wild cat is. What say if I take a kiss for my job of manicurin'?" He brought the girl closer.

She struggled desperately to free herself. Old Sandy Starr and another of the Malone crew were moving in, but before they got close, the girl twisted from Rawls' grasp, and her hand arose carrying with it the long braided rawhide reins of her bridle. She drew back her arm and brought the leather tips across the rancher's face.

WITH a roar of rage, Rawls charged in, only to have his arm caught from behind, with such force that he was half whirled about. He turned to glance into the blazing face of Smoke Darrell.

"I wouldn't do anything hasty," advised Smoke. "You had it coming, Rawls."

Rawls let out another roar. He struck out with a hard fist that was like a hammer, and which would have felled the cowboy—if it had landed.

With the speed of a trained boxer Smoke let the blow slide glancingly over his shoulder.

Then with the timing of the same trained boxer, his right hand came up in a short jolting blow that had all the cowboy's muscle and perfect timing behind it. There was a loud crack. The blow, landing on Rawls' jaw, lifted him from his feet and sent him to the ground, where he

lay on his back for a moment half-stunned.

THE bullet-head, Torp, rushed toward Darrell, and the cowboys hopped from the wall. There was one lightning-like movement of Darrell's hand and it swept up the gun from its holster, turned the barrel first on Torp, then on the rest.

"Calm down," he said. "This fight is just personal—between me and Rawls—if he still wants it to be a fight. The rest of you keep out."

The girl turned to him, perplexed. She was completely at sea. The day before he had pretended to give friendly advice. She had next seen him here in the enemy camp, on good terms with Rawls. And just now he had come to her defense.

Rawls got up, cursing, mouthing threats at Darrell. But he made no effort to resume the fight or to go for his gun.

"I come," said Darrell, "from a country where men don't force their attentions on helpless women. Maybe it's different here. You can't blame her, Rawls. She's a kid. Gone through a lot of grief. Let her alone. Keep your love-making for later on—under the moonlight."

"Damn you!" raged Rawls. "I'll—"

"Any time you decide to stop swearing and start action," said Darrell, "it'll be plumb agreeable with me." But Rawls' hands kept away from the pair of white-handled guns in his tied-down holsters. He had not been too stunned to see that flashing draw. And there was no chance of bluffing this Smoke.

The cowboy stood, bleak-faced, jaw tight, and his gray eyes were suddenly glinting like green ice. He was looking at Rawls like a hungry mountain lion might look at a sheep. To Rawls it seemed that Darrell was praying that he would try to draw. Doc Moore, the Rawls hired gunman who had shot down Jim Malone, had that same eager look just before he killed. This stranger, Smoke, wanted to kill him, wanted Rawls to give him the slightest excuse to shoot.

Rawls, used as he was to death and facing it, shivered a little. He quieted suddenly. "There's something queer about you, fella," he said to Smoke. "I'll investigate later. Don't get in my way now."

"I got no intention of getting in yore way," said Darrell. "You run yore business, but keep it strictly business—like having men shot down by yore private gunman. Don't bring women into it."

Rawls delivered a final snarling ultimatum. "I've stated my terms, Miss Malone," he rasped out. "The next move that's made to open that valve is the signal for my men to start shootin' at yore crew. Maybe we wouldn't go quite so far as to shoot a girl. When you git ready to accept my terms, let me know."

He turned and stalked toward the black-walled house. Darrell turned away, apparently indifferent to what happened, and rolled a cigarette. The cattle continued to bawl and fight and mill around the troughs. The girl looked at them and the sight turned her sick.

The hard-eyed, round-faced man called Torp had been left in charge of Rawls' men. They stayed about the tank, with their guns ready, waiting for the Malone's next move.

BY this time all the Malone crew had ridden up, including the loud-voiced, swaggering Windy Tolliver. And again he brought up the strange offer he had made before.

"What about that proposition now?" he said to her in a voice that reached her ears alone. "You

marry me and we take these cattle as guardians for Big and Little Casino and set up ranchin'. You think I'm bluffin', but I ain't. I know a way out of this mess. And it don't have nothin' to do with Rawls."

She looked at him contemptuously. "You pretend to be in our employ, and you hold something like that back?" she demanded. "These two boys are your relatives. And yet you refuse to help? Haven't you any heart?"

"I got plenty of heart—for you, Cherry," he told her. "Say the word and I'll git you out of this. I had a reason for coming on this trip. I had a idea what might happen. And yuh can save these cows by promisin' to marry me. I don't mean just to marry me and then you leave me. I mean to *marry* me for keeps. To live as my wife. I'll take yore word on it. I know it's good."

She did not even consider the big, swaggering cowboy's terms. She did not believe him, of course, but even if she had, his terms were impossible. While she would work to help Big and Little Casino become men worthy of the name, teaching school to support them, doing anything honorable, she would not consider a hateful marriage to Windy Tolliver.

SHE was beaten. To hold off would only cause the suffering cattle further tortures. To sell at a dollar a head meant plain robbery, as much as a bold-faced theft. She would give in, tell the bullet-headed man, Torp, to call Rawls back.

First, however, she talked to Sandy Starr and the others. They offered to try to seize the reservoir by force, but she would not permit that. The odds against them were hopeless.

She turned to call to Torp and met the eyes of the stranger she knew only by the name which Rawls had called him, Smoke. He drifted over, raised his hands to adjust the cinch on her saddle, and spoke to her in a low tone, his lips hardly moving.

"Wait until tonight. Don't give in," he told her. And then he drifted back.

She wavered for a moment. What did he mean? Did he have some plan of help? But why put any faith in him, a man here in the camp of the enemy?

Yet something about his face, the straight, honest glance of his eyes, the quiet strength behind the young rider, bade her pause. Yesterday he had snatched her from under the flailing hoofs of her dying horse. Today he was offering some way of snatching her from the deadly power of Buck Rawls.

She turned to Sandy Starr and the rest. "We'll wait," was her decision.

CHAPTER IV

Moonlight Interview

JUST BEFORE dark half of Rawls' men came in to eat supper, leaving the rest on guard at the tank. The stranger, known to the men simply as Smoke, and who had shown no special sociability toward any of the crew, did not appear.

Buck Rawls noticed his absence. "What become of that Smoke?" he asked Torp, the thick-bodied gorilla who was his lieutenant.

"Last I seen him," said Torp, "he was startin' out for a walk toward the Sands."

"He's goin' to draw a six-foot hole in the ground for hornin' in on my play this evenin'," growled Rawls. "I'll string along with him

until we git that bunch of black cows over here, and then I'm settlin' with him. No man can crack me in the jaw and live."

"You better have Doc Moore prepare his corpse for plantin' boss," advised Torp. "Don't take no chances. This Smoke is fast. Damn fast. He could just about shade Doc."

Rawls for years had carried two guns. In the San Christobal country he was counted as dangerous as his chief gun-slinger, "Doc" Moore, who, acting as guide for the Malone herd, had killed Jim Malone. But Rawls preferred to hire Moore to do his killings. Why take chances himself?

He had already sent for Moore, figuring that with the Malones being stubborn, an extra gun could be used. Before it had always been Moore's role to disappear after acting as guide for the hapless herds that found disaster in the San Christobal.

RAWLS was a little uneasy about the attitude of the Malone temporary trail boss, the slip of a girl who had single-handed bulldozed his gang of men. Yet what could the girl and her crew do? The cattle were still milling and bawling for water. Their situation was as hopeless as ever. What were they waiting for then?"

"I thought they'd decided to take yore terms, Chief," said Torp. "Yessir, the girl and some o' her men talked together and from their faces it shore looked to me they'd decided to give up. An' that girl, she looked over toward me as if she was goin' to tell me she'd quit."

"Yeah? And what changed her mind?"

"I dunno," growled Torp. "But what happened was that this here stranger, Smoke, he strolled over, and he tightened the cinch on her horse. Maybe he said something to her, but I never heard him. But right after that she told them men o' hers 'We'll wait'."

Rawls, swearing whole-heartedly, poured a drink from a whisky jug into a tin cup and downed it.

"Something fishy about him. He ain't exactly the kind that Bull Lyons would send over from Mogador."

"Nope, he don't look like a cow thief," said Torp with a frankness that got an angry look from his boss. Buck Rawls had a certain pride: he did not regard himself as a cow thief. The measures he took to buy cattle cheaply he claimed were merely "good business."

He had an arrangement with half a dozen men like Bull Lyons, in various towns, "lookouts" who could persuade owners of herds in search of new range to cross the San Christobal country. The scheme was not worked often, and usually against small outfits, so that word of it would not get around. Bull Lyons of Mogador, who had sent over a messenger with a marked .44 bullet as passport, was one of these lookouts.

SO far it had been a very profitable business. Never once had they failed. Doc Moore generally got a job acting as guide across the desert to lead the herd far astray. When the owner accused him of treachery, Moore would kill him and make a fast escape.

Leaving the herd with only a foreman in charge, with title resting in an estate, helped make for a quick settlement. The quick settlement was always an arrangement by which Rawls got a herd for practically nothing. The profits he split with his helpers and lookouts.

At dark Moore arrived. The

slender, whipstock gunman came in through the back, with a noiseless catlike step that hinted at the man's smooth speed.

"Well, I done a good job—killin' old Malone," said Moore boastfully. "Didn't I, hey, Buck?"

"Yeah," admitted Rawls. "But that business ain't over yet—as you kin tell by the cows bawlin' out there."

"They'll have to buckle under," said Moore confidently. "A colt with the blind staggers could see they're licked. Besides, that little filly of a girl is too soft-hearted to stand by an' see cows die o' thirst."

"Soft-hearted!" spat out Rawls. "Who—that little cat? But I'll tame her right." His face still smarted from the blow delivered by the braided rawhide ends of Cherry's bridle reins. "She's a looker, I'll say that. A looker."

BUT she's shore lookin' the other way when it comes to you, boss," put in Torp playfully.

"We got a stranger in here," remarked Rawls. "Calls hisself Smoke. Come from Bull Lyons at Mogador with news of another herd that Bull is aimin' to send over this way. This *hombre* seems to be a fast worker with a gun."

"An' with his fists," chuckled Torp, to be rewarded with another black scowl from his boss. Rawls swung around.

"Torp," he growled, "some day yore sense of humor is goin' to be too much for my nerves. I ain't likin' this *hombre* much. An' he don't like me. Him and me is due for a ruckus, soon's my business with him is done."

"Speakin' of Lyons," said Moore, "I got word Bull's headed over this way. A cowboy from that country said Bull told him a week ago he was driftin' across to see yuh."

"That's hunky-dory," grunted Rawls. "We'll find out about Mister Smoke. Don't tell him nothin' 'bout Bull comin'."

SMOKE DARRELL meanwhile had drifted over the hill as if to take a look at the White Sands. But as soon as he got out of sight of the ranch, he turned down an arroyo and kept along it until he was not far from the Malone wagons. He was still within easy sight of the ranch, but he was able to signal Little Casino Malone without attracting the attention of Rawls' guards near the tank.

The boy came over at once.

"Son," said Darrell, "I wish you'd ask the big boss of the outfit to come over for a powwow. If she don't want to come alone, she can bring some of the other men. I want to talk to her."

Evidently the girl was not afraid to come alone, for no sooner had Cherry got the message than she started for the arroyo. The men were making supper over a camp fire.

In the arroyo bottom Smoke faced her. The girl was neither hostile nor friendly; plainly she reserved judgment.

"Ma'am," said Smoke, "I'm realizin' the bad company I keep needs considerable explainin'. I never figured on crawling into a hole and associatin' with the rattlers in it, but I've the same as done it by chummin' with Buck Rawls and his gang."

He stopped, regarded the girl anxiously. "But maybe you won't believe what I tell yuh."

She looked at him steadily for a moment in turn. "I think I will," she told him. "Try it."

"In the first place then," said Smoke, "last night was the first I ever spent in that black ranch

house. I never talked to those men before, any of 'em. But although they ain't hospitable to strangers, they received me. You see, I had a passport that made 'em friendly. I hadn't planned to use it except in an emergency."

He did not tell Cherry that the emergency had been the disaster which had come to her.

"Those men are my enemies, although they don't know it yet. I don't mind telling you why. When I was 'bout the size of Little Casino, something happened that—well, no use after all in hashin' it over. But it's something that's got to be settled with 'em. I've decided now it can wait," he finished awkwardly. "You're in a tough place, Miss Malone. If I can help out any, I'll do it. And I think I can."

"But how can anyone help us?" asked the girl. "Our cattle need water. We're not strong enough to take it."

DARRELL smiled. "There's ways of takin' things without being strong," he said. "I'm telling you a secret. Yore cows are going to have all the water they can drink—just as soon as it gets good and dark."

"You mean that?" The girl's head lifted in sudden hope.

"I promise it. Yore cattle is goin' to get filled up with water. Move 'em out toward mornin', straight back over the hill, and turn towards the White Sands. It's a long, tough drive across the Sands, but there's no other way out. You'll see a peak 'crosst the White Sands, shaped sorta like the round, flat horn of a Mexican saddle. Head straight for it, an' if yuh shove along steady you can make a dry drive to a ranch right under that peak, an' they won't charge yuh for water. Yuh'll get through if yuh don't happen to strike a wind storm on the Sands. Storms on the Sands is hell, I've heard; nothin' can live through 'em."

"But Rawls—won't he attack?"

"He may be mad enough to after yore cattle gets water tonight," Darrell admitted. "You want to be ready for him. Take yore crew into the rocks back of the wagons. He'll be slow to jump yuh there. By morning when you move out, he'll be calmed down. Rawls ain't no open cow thief. He wants his deals to be half-way legal. A battle with a lot of men killed means the end of his little game. Another thing; he'll figure you won't try the White Sands, and any other way he'll figure you can't make it to water. He'll think he's still got a chance to buy yore herd cheap."

"And you?" she asked. "Do you intend to stay in this rattlesnake den?"

"I dunno. I got to play the cards as they're dealt. If I get enough aces, I may be riding up to yore chuck wagon soon. If I do, set a place for a cowboy named Darrell."

"That cowboy named Darrell will have the place of honor," the girl said warmly. "I wish you could come with us—I don't mean for your help. If they find out you're here under false pretenses, they'll kill you."

LIKELY," he said indifferently. "But maybe by staying with 'em, I may be able to help you more than by an open break. As soon as you're safe out of the country, I'm telling that gang who I am and what my business over here is. Four men of this bunch specially: Rawls, Torp, Doc Moore that killed yore uncle, and another man named Bull Lyons."

Again the grim set look came to his face. In it could be read the

indomitable, fierce determination to accomplish some task—though certain death lay ahead. With her feminine intuition Cherry guessed his errand to the White Sands country. He had business with four men. She knew suddenly what kind of business. Guns.

SHE wanted to put up her hands and try to iron out the deep lines in Smoke Darrell's face. Behind them lay some great hurt. Instead she had to say good-by, to let him go away casually, when she wanted as she had never wanted anything before to persuade him to stay with them, to get safely out of the rattler den of Buck Rawls.

Her hands came out impulsively to meet his strong brown ones, to be held tightly.

"S'long, Miss Cherry Malone. Somehow, I like to say yore whole name, and to look at you while I'm saying it."

"S'long, Smoke Darrell. None of your Blarney." She slipped a little nearer to him. "Try to forget that 'business' with Rawls and the rest, Smoke—the thing that brought you here. Won't you?" she whispered.

The moon had risen above the desert. The night cast its spell over the two, worked a charm that caused the two young people to forget their dangers.

Darrell leaned a little closer to her. His heart was suddenly pounding. No man could be blind to the allure of this girl, with her strange mixture of weakness and strength, of thorns hiding behind soft rose petals.

"I can't forget what brought me here," said Darrell huskily. "Any more than I could ever forget you. If I went away and forgot, I wouldn't be fit to speak to you. Some time I'll tell you what it is." The hands drew her close, and he bent to brush her lips with his own.

Cherry went back to the camp fire with the energetic little steps with which she always walked. Windy Tolliver at once sought her out.

"How about it?" he said. "Ready to make that bargain? Don't expect me to weaken an' tell yuh how to git outa this mess. I won't do it."

"Your great secret may not be worth so very much after all, Windy," she repulsed him. "I've got a hunch we're going to get out of here—and without your help."

* * *

On his way back to the house by the roundabout way he had come from it, Darrell noticed that all of Rawls' men had withdrawn a little from the reservoir. He strolled over, sat down with his back to the rock wall and rolled a smoke. He seemed to have a lot of trouble in getting the cigarette lighted, and finally he had to squat down behind the tank away from the wind to get a match to burn.

THEN he ambled on into the house and helped himself to a belated supper from the Dutch ovens and skillets on the stove in the kitchen.

"Meet some company, Smoke," said Rawls with deep sarcasm as he brought in his plate of grub. "Friend of mine. Name of Doc Moore. Doc, meet Mister Smoke. Where'd you say you was from, Smoke?"

"I don't know as I said," stated Darrell calmly. "Why?"

"You kind o' remind me of somebody," said Rawls thoughtfully. "Somebody I knowed long ago."

Darrell finished his supper and leaned back for a smoke. "As I was sayin'," said Rawls, "yuh kind o' remind—"

"B-O-O-M!" It came without

warning, a heavy explosion that rattled the poorly-fitted windows of the house. Following the "Boom!" alarmed yells came from the direction of the big water reservoir.

Torp burst into the house. "The tank's been dynamited, Chief!" he bawled. "One side of it fell, and the water's all flowin' out. That Malone herd is standin' knee-deep in water."

CHAPTER V

A Little Surprise for Darrell

RAWLS' Black Rock Ranch was at once thrown into a shouting turmoil. The guards at the corrals had dashed madly out of the way of the water that swept down on them. None had been hurt by the explosion, since the men had been squatting some forty feet from the tank at the time of the blast. The explosion had not thrown fragments of rock; it had merely undermined the wall so that it fell over.

Through the great gap left, like a dam disaster in miniature, the water poured. The reservoir was both deep and large; in it enough water was stored to supply a small village.

To the surprise of the tortured Malone herd they were suddenly knee-deep in water. There was water for them to wallow in, to drink and drink and drink—clear, good water that was no relation to the bitter, alkaline mud-holes from which they had drunk on their desert drive.

It was fortunate for the Malone herd that cattle, unlike humans, do not often die from taking on too great cargoes of water after long periods of thirst.

Rawls and his men ran helplessly about, and finally stood still and cursed. They could not dam that flow, and they could not keep the herd from drinking it. The guards were loud in their claim that the Malones had not been near the tank, could not have placed the dynamite that wrecked it.

At any rate, wherever the blame was placed, it would not be easy to vent their anger on the Malone trail drivers. These had retired to the little rocky point behind the wagons, in a spot which lent itself well to a defense if an attack came.

Rawls considered this new development. Beyond the loss of the tank wall, which would need complete rebuilding, the disaster meant that the Malones would no longer consider his purchase offer.

CATTLE can stand a great deal of punishment, especially a herd in good flesh like the Malone's. They would be capable, Rawls realized, of trailing several days on the strength of this watering. But they would be unable to retrace the route over which they had come—he was sure of that. They had exhausted all of the available water holes. Nor could they make it to the nearest water on the east. While the White Sands raised their forbidding group to the north and west. No stranger would ever attempt to drive cattle across that barrier.

Meanwhile, the cattle, with their thirst slaked and bellies filled to capacity, had stopped their mournful bellowing. They were too full to give anything but a few of the hiccoughing gasps that comes from drinking well rather than wisely. A little later, driven by hunger, they began to graze on the available grass and shrubs.

Silence fell over the ranch, leaving moonlight gleaming on the isolated pools of water, in which a few cattle still stood, as if to soak in the water they could no longer drink.

A steady stream still ran from the broken reservoir to trickle into an arroyo.

In the house Rawls was turning over things in his shrewd mind. For all of his ruthlessness, he knew he could go so far and no farther. The sheriff was leagued with him, but the official would not string along with him in wholesale murder. If Rawls should start a general massacre of the Malone trail herders, the result would be an investigation and probably murder charges. It would also certainly put an end to his little spider-fly game of inveigling herds into the web of the San Christobal desert.

HE sat at the table, drinking heavily from the white whisky jug, and the more he drank, and turned over the affair in his mind, the more enraged he got. Smoke had come back and sat playing solitaire.

"Ever since *you* come here, there's been trouble," Rawls burst out finally, looking at Smoke. "This is the first herd I ever slipped up on."

"I hope you don't mean to accuse me of blowing up yore reservoir," said Smoke blandly. "Where would I get the dynamite, and when did I have a chance to put it under that wall? Furthermore, if you don't like my company, say so, and I'll go back and tell Bull Lyons it's all off. I came over here to make plans for this herd from Mogador, and you done nothin' but act suspicious. I don't like it."

"Well, mebbe I'm wrong," half-apologized Rawls. "But watch yore step, fella, and God help yuh if yo're tryin' to put anything over on me."

Smoke shrugged his shoulders, yawned and got up. "I'm turnin' in for some shut-eye," he announced. "Wake me for breakfast, an' make it a good one. I've et better chuck than yuh furnish here, Rawls."

Rawls turned in an hour later, still in a bad temper. He was in a worse one when at the first pale sign of dawn one of his riders rushed into the big room where all the men, including Darrell, bunked.

"Them Malones has vamoosed, boss," he reported. "Slipped out over the hill, headin' back south. What we goin' to do about 'em?"

Rawls was torn between two courses. One was to rush out with all his riders and seize the herd by force, shooting down even the girl and the two boys if they resisted. But the wiser one he realized was to wait.

"Back trailin', huh?" he said. "They won't git far. They a'ready cleaned out all the water holes on that trail. They'll be cryin' to me to buy their herd at two-bits a head before they're done."

"Me," said Doc Moore, "I'm in favor of takin' 'em with guns. Don't play around with 'em. They dynamited that tank. Who else could of done it?"

"Better not spoil our chances on this black herd comin' this way from Mogador," said *Darrell* smoothly. "News of a bad shootin' here would git out to the drivers of that bunch, and they'd never fall into this trap."

"Smoke's right," said *Rawls*. "We'll play along. Let 'em try to make it out of this country. They won't git far."

EVEN Darrell had to admit that Rawls might be right—they might not get far. The Malone herd was taking a desperate chance in trying to cross the White Sands. It was a dry drive all the way, not only across the miles of white desert waste, but another drive to the ranch under the horn-shaped moun-

tain. It would take the herd's last ounce of strength to make it.

If they were held up a day or so, it meant almost certain ruin. At best it was a gamble against long odds. Yet it had been their only chance.

No effort was made to hold back the Malone herd. Leisurely the ranch stirred into activity. The wrangler brought in the horses and put them in a rock-walled corral below the house. Darrell dressed and went to the kitchen to rustle a breakfast.

Rawls on rising went to his jug for his usual morning eye-opener. He was taking it in the company of Doc Moore and Torp when there was a sudden hammer of hoofs up to the house. Rising above the sound of the horse came the barking of the savage dog.

THE gorilla-like Torp went to the door, flung it open and yelled fiercely at the animal. Then he shouted a greeting. The newcomer got down, leaving his reins grounded. "Where at's the boss?" he demanded. "I been ridin' all night to git here; couldn't git a drop of water out on that dang desert of your'n."

He strode into the house, black-bearded, as husky as Torp, and larger, with little, black, glittering eyes.

"Why, hello there, Bull!" said Rawls heartily. "What's led yuh to bounce yore big carcass over this way hossback? What's up?"

"A hell of a question to be askin' me," growled Lyons. "What's wrong with yuh, Buck? I sent yuh word over a week ago of a chance to get a bunch of Angus cattle headed this way. And here I ain't had no answer. I sent over 'Slim' Early with a message. Why ain't yuh got in touch with me?"

For a moment the hawk-nosed Rawls stared. He had last seen Smoke going into the kitchen to get his breakfast. He glanced at the door which led to the kitchen, saw it was shut.

Then "Yuh sent Slim Early?" Rawls muttered, as his twin guns slipped from their holsters. "With a bullet, eh, to show me?" His voice, while it kept its low tone, dripped with menace.

"That soft-talkin' sneakin' *hombre* must of fell in with Slim Early, got outa him what message he was bringin' over and got hold of that cartridge. And maybe killed Slim. Then he come over here and pretended to be Bull's messenger. He's a spy o' some sort."

"Whoever he is, he's snarled up things right," rasped out Bull Lyons. "That black herd has turned aside; ain't comin' through here. If not for something happenin' to Slim, we'd of had 'em crossin' by this way. They'd of been our meat."

THAT settles it," Rawls gritted out. "We'll kill this bird, and then go out and jump that Malone bunch and grab their herd. We'll wipe that crew out—massacre 'em. All except one. I'm goin' to have me that reddish-haired little filly to keep house for me a while. I been gettin' tired of Joe's cookin', anyway. That girl'd make a fit housekeeper for a gent like me, and if she breaks in quiet to harness, maybe I'll even marry her. Cherry is her name and cherry is how red her lips is.

"Doc, git out yore guns," he ordered. "Yuh Bull and Torp, too." His voice fell to a husky whisper. "He's in the kitchen gittin' hisself a belly full of beef and beans. When he comes in here we'll feed him a belly full of lead. When that double-crossin' bird comes through the

door, all of us let him have it—right through the guts. Don't take no chances on him—he's a hell-on-wheels.

"Hey, Smoke!" called Rawls. "Bring in yore breakfast and be sociable. Better have a drink of whisky to go along with that beef and beans."

There was the sound of a pair of high-heeled boots clicking across the kitchen floor. The knob of the door turned slowly. The four men waiting for Smoke Darrell tensed. The black barrels of their guns shifted to point at the doorway through which in another minute Smoke Darrell would pass.

CHAPTER VI

Out Into the White Sands

THE DOOR swung in. In another second a hail of lead would be thudding into the man opening it. Then the faces of the four relaxed. It was the cook who had entered.

"That Smoke ain't in here—" he began. His eyes suddenly popped at the sight of the guns trained on him.

"Where at is he?" bawled Rawls.

"Don't turn yore guns!" snapped a voice from behind him. "I'm right behind yuh, gents." The voice came from the door that opened to the back of the house. Steel in that voice, beneath its soft tone. "I happened to see Lyons ridin' toward the house." They looked back over their shoulders, twisting their heads but keeping their six-shooters to the front.

"Drop yore guns!" he ordered. "Let 'em fall."

"Yuh can't git away with it, Smoke," said Rawls hoarsely.

"I stand ready to be corrected on that," drawled Darrell. "But while we argue that point, Buck, let's see if you can hit the floor with yore irons. Drop 'em! *Pronto!*"

Rawls' guns dropped with a clatter. Torp followed suit, and then Lyons. Only Doc Moore hesitated.

"Are you hard of hearin', Mister Moore?" asked Darrell. "Or just stubborn? Or maybe tryin' to think up some kid trick?"

Moore's guns followed the rest. They turned slowly, hands raised shoulder high. The cook who was unarmed also raised his hands.

"The four horsemen of the Black Rock Ranch," commented Smoke bitterly.

Bull Lyons was staring with small eyes suddenly opened wide. "That's the *hombre* that was in town makin' inquiries about that black herd that trailed in here ten years ago. What was the name of the owner of that other black herd, Buck?"

"Darrell," Smoke answered him. "Darrell." His voice was filled with so much hatred that the four men flinched away from him.

"I was with that herd. Just a kid. Come in with my father and his partner. A man volunteered to guide 'em through the desert. Doc Moore was his name. A gunman. He didn't dare try to shoot my father from the front. Scared to try it. Remember that, Doc? I see yo're still at the same game.

"Dad had a new bunch o' riders, half of 'em in yore pay, Rawls. Yuh killed him, his partner and three riders that stuck with 'em on the showdown. The only one that got away was a boy. Me. I rode out of there across the White Sands, made it away from yore gunmen, happenin' to be on a fast horse. A button I was then, but I'm growed now. Grew up on a Montana ranch with some relatives. Plannin' for the time I could come back here as a man, and shoot you snakes down like you did my dad, savvy? But

not in the same way—in the back. Face to face."

HIS words held them so still that the ticking of Torp's big silver watch could be heard when he stopped talking. Rawls had paled a little. Moore stood defiantly, gaunt, tall, lips drawn back from broken-off teeth tusks. The piggish eyes of Bull Lyons and Torp were fastened on the hammer of the gun Darrell held.

"It'd be easy to end yuh four right now, while yore guns are on the floor. Four shots would do it, while you scrambled to pick up yore weapons. But it ain't my way. I'll finish you all, but it'll be while givin' yuh a even break."

Torp cringed away from the gun that at any moment might belch out a stream of avenging flame and lead. Too close to it for comfort, he shifted position, moving a little in front of the bulk of Bull Lyons.

It gave Lyons a chance. A chance to let his right hand fall a little lower, to send that hand darting like the head of a striking rattler under the jacket for the gun hidden in a shoulder holster. The hand never got out. The gun roared in the doorway, caught Bull squarely in the forehead. For a second he stood erect, as if he still lived in spite of a shattered brain; then with his hand still thrust in his jacket he went down.

The others did not move, but steps sounded outside.

"Hey, what's happened in there?" one of Rawls' men demanded without coming in. Trouble between gunmen of the calibre of those inside meant real trouble—trouble one did not burst in on until ordered.

"I'm seeing you again, the three of you that's left," whipped out Smoke. "I ain't got the heart to kill rattlers like you without yore havin' a chance. But don't forget—I'm coming back."

He stepped forward, picked up the men's guns, kept one of them as an extra gun for himself and flung the rest through an open window and then he was gone, flashing through the doorway.

"After him!" roared Rawls. "Gimme a gun! Cut him down! Where's everybody?"

Most of them were still sleeping in the bunkroom. Two men were at the ruined tank. As Darrell escaped from the house, one of them shouted and raised his six-shooter to send a quick shot at him. The distance Darrell knew was too great for anyone except an expert pistol shot. This puncher was no expert, judging by the distance he had missed. A second and a third shot came, sailed far wide.

Smoke raced across the yard to the wall of the first corral, slipped along it to a second, the one in which the wrangler had penned the men's horses.

His *grulla* mount stood tied just outside the corral gate, saddled and bridled by Darrell after he had slipped out of the house on identifying the approaching rider as Bull Lyons. In no mood merely to mount and make his escape, Smoke flung down the bars of the corral gate and darted in among the horses.

UNDER cover of the rock walls facing the house, he brought his rifle into action. Rawls' men were firing from the slit-like windows, afraid to show themselves in the open, all except one man standing in the doorway. Smoke's first shot smashed into the door frame, sent splinters flying into the man's eyes, drove him back screaming with pain. The bunch of horses in the corral had already made a break for the gate, left open by Darrell, to race

for the freedom of their pasture.

The slit-like windows hurled shots toward the corral, and Darrell emptied his rifle to drive them back temporarily. The last horse was just hopping the fallen bars. He ran across, gathered up the reins of his *grulla* and made a flying leap to the saddle.

Under the jabbing spurs, the *grulla* bolted forward. Riding low, Smoke swung around to the side of the running remuda, caught up with the slower horses before the rifles at the house got into action again.

There was still a hundred yards of open space between him and the sheltering banks of the arroyo for which the remuda were heading. Smoke whooped the band to racing speed, meanwhile keeping them between him and the house.

"Git him; crack down on him!" yelled Rawls.

Eight or ten rifles "cracked down," trying to hit the rider of the *grulla*, racing on the far side of the cavvy. Dust swirled high from the drumming hoofs. A little pinto went down next to Darrell, turned a complete somersault.

Then the trough of the arroyo was before them. Smoke's *grulla* pitched down it's steep bank neck and neck with the leaders of the horse bunch. The pasture trail ran along the arroyo bottom for half a mile before emerging to climb over a ridge. By the time they were climbing the ridge, Darrell was out of rifle range.

He had learned the country well during the time he had spent watching the Rawls ranch. He knew that the horse pasture was enclosed by a fence on the east, beyond which lay a great area of open range. Rawls' saddle band if driven through this fence would stay out until somebody gathered them. A sweet job for Rawls' men, set afoot.

One thing he had almost forgotten: there was one horse left on the ranch, the jaded animal which Bull Lyons had ridden up. That horse had to be disposed of.

After topping the hill and disappearing from view of the ranch, Smoke tied his horse and walked back, carrying his rifle. A rider was just fogging out from the ranch on Lyons' mount, in pursuit of the remuda. Darrell hated to kill a horse, but it had to be done.

WAITING until horse and rider got within easy range, he dropped the animal with a shot through the head. Rawls and his men were set afoot. It would take them a day, maybe two, to gather their cavvy again. Riding on, Smoke caught up with the horses, hazed them toward the fence. Reaching it several miles from the ranch, he kicked a few staples from a post, let down the wires and drove the bunch through. Setting Rawls afoot would give the Malones an extra day's leeway, maybe two. They needed it. Darrell had overheard Rawls' decision to wipe out the Malone riders.

The Malone herd, once it was out of sight of the ranch house, had turned to head straight for the White Sands and the peak landmark beyond. Old Sandy Starr was at point. The herd was swinging along briskly over the hard-packed surface of the gypsum crystals, exactly like dry, powdery snow.

The wagons they had left at the edge of the Sands. They could go back for them later. The heavily-loaded vehicles would sink in too far, and meanwhile the services of the two teamsters were needed as riders. They packed necessities on some of the mules and threw them in with their extra saddle horses.

And then like a fleet abandoning part of its ships in mid-ocean, they

had set out into the uncharted white sea that rose before them.

The girl was on a flank, riding her sorrel, wondering what was happening to Smoke, when a *grulla* horse trotted alongside.

"Hello, Miss Cherry Malone," the rider greeted her.

Her face lighted up radiantly. "You — Smoke!" she exclaimed. "Back—safe. You got away from them! Smoke, don't go back there again. I can guess why you came here. Perhaps your family lost a herd in here?"

"You've guessed it. My father and his partner. Shot down by this polecat outfit. They knew my father was fighter enough to take water for his herd if he couldn't buy it for a reasonable price. He was shot in the back. But that can wait now. I'm going with you through this mess."

YOU dynamited the reservoir wall last night?"

He chuckled. "Yes. I had the sticks and caps and fuse already placed under it, and hidden. Went down there a week ago and did the job when the ranch was deserted. All I had to do last night was light the fuse. I had some idea that I could take their horses and shut them up at the ranch without water —make them suffer as they made cattle and men suffer. As it is, I left them afoot. We've got a day, maybe a couple, to make tracks. Then they'll be comin' hell-bent after us."

"But it'll be after 'us.' You'll be with us. I feel like saying 'Goody, goody.' And I will say it's mighty kind of you, Smoke Darrell, to risk your life for a bunch of strangers."

"That was day before yesterday —when we were strangers. You won't ever be a stranger to me after this, Cherry Malone. I had to come to ride along with you. Last night I never wanted to do anything else so bad as ride with you. I've got to end the men who ended my father."

She nodded. "I know. They killed Uncle Jim, and Big Casino and Little Casino when they're grown will be riding back to try to kill these men. But wouldn't you keep away from this bunch forever, if someone asked you to, Smoke?"

He shook his head. "It's got to come to a showdown."

She sighed. If he knew he were riding to his death, he would return to Rawls' ranch. Nothing would turn him from what he had believed was justice: strong, simple Western justice that is more just than law, executed by men who condemned, and carried out their own sentences.

Her small brown hand came out to rest on his own strong one atop the saddle horn. Down deep, she felt as he did. Her mother had loaded guns for her grandfather during attacks of Comanches; and one day single-handed fought off a renegade bunch of Mexican horse thieves.

"I understand, Smoke," she said. "I'll be praying for you—to come back."

WINDY TOLLIVER came riding up to them. "Meet the new boss of the crew," the girl told him. "Smoke Darrell. Were taking orders from him."

"Yeah?" said Tolliver. "New trail boss, hey?" He stared hostilely. "And yo're trustin' him? Don't you see it's a new trap? Rawls sent him to go with us. I'll bet before yo're done, that you give in and meet my terms. There's a storm whippin' up here, and you don't know what it means to be crossin' the White Sands in a storm. We're goin' to git hell. I know!"

CHAPTER VII

Walls of Sand

OUT OF the northwest a little wind moved, in lazy gusts which swept before them a few white particles from the surface of the Sands, as a housewife might use a broom on a floor.

These gusts dying away, left the air thick and breathless for a few minutes. The storm like a huge animal, having given a few playful taps with its paw, was slowly gathering its strength for serious business.

Without warning the wind sprang to energetic life, coming straight off the mountains, increasing little by little in violence.

Beneath the hoofs of the cattle and the horses the gypsum particles began to kick up in earnest, at first in little spurts that whirled against the legs of the animals and sank in tiny drifts. Then they rose in thicker clouds to hit the flanks and bodies of the horses and cattle; sweeping still higher, they swirled about the heads of the riders.

After that in less than an hour the whole space between earth and sky was filled with the drifting sand, literally tons of it floating in the air, driven by the powerful and constantly increasing force of the wind. There was no longer any sky; instead an atmosphere of flying white grains through which the sun's rays filtered more and more feebly.

Smoke Darrell's face settled in worried lines, although as Cherry Malone rode over to him he grinned cheerfully.

"A storm sure 'nough," he remarked. "That big Windy cowboy of yores ought to get a job predictin' weather."

"That's why they call him Windy, I guess," she chuckled. "Because he's good at predicting wind storms."

The sand swirled up so thickly for a moment that the herd was hidden from them. The cattle kept their faces into it and for a while met it steadily, but before a huge white driving cloud the leaders veered and changed their course. Yelling savagely, Big Casino and Little Casino charged them. Leaving his position at point, the old-timer, Sandy Starr, rode back to help the two boys drive them back into line. And still the wind rose in velocity.

The white particles got into the eyes of the drivers, into their nostrils. Even when they pulled their neckerchiefs tight up over their faces, the gypsum still penetrated, burned their eyes, came close to suffocating them. It swept off their chaps like powdery, dry snow, but the sweaty coats of the cattle caught the sand and held it until the herd looked as if it had passed through a blizzard.

Great high white walls containing billions of fine grains rushed toward them, drifted and eddied, whirled and turned. Before the heavy force of these walls, it was inevitable that the whole line of cattle should turn and keep stubbornly turned, in spite of all the yelling and rope thumping the drivers could bring to persuade them otherwise.

Only when the wind sank a little were the riders, galloping fast over the hard surface of the dunes and valleys, able to bend the herd back into a straight line.

BY now the sky was one great white blanket. The sun, after a few attempts to shine through, sullenly retreated, left only a pale saffron blur to mark its place.

Darrell galloped up the line to

Cherry Malone's side. There was no longer any attempt to hide the seriousness of their situation. "No telling how long this will last," he shouted above the howling of the storm.

She nodded. "You're in charge, Smoke: whatever you say goes."

He had no hesitation in taking the responsibility, but he rode up to confer with Sandy Starr. It was impossible to keep the cattle headed into the wind, to cross the Sands. Plainly they could not allow the cattle to drift back on the desert where there was no water except at Buck Rawls' springs.

I KNOW of a place in here we could lay over," proposed Darrell. "You saw the two long rock ridges south of us sticking up out of the Sands. There's a sort of canyon between those ridges where we'd be out of the wind. It's rimmed in by high rock walls and protected against the wind and the drifting of this cussed gypsum. Used to be a ranch there—old stone house still left. There's even some feed for the cattle in the canyon bottom, but not a drop of water. Still it means protection from this wind and a way to hold the herd from wandering back on the desert. What do you think, Sandy?"

"F'r gosh sakes, le's git to that place," stated Sandy Starr. "You know this country, Smoke; you know cows; don't waste time askin' me what I think. Let's head for that canyon and hole up until this is over.

"You take point; we'll make this herd foller yuh or wear out our ropes ag'in their ornery ribs."

The herd was allowed to swing south, to drift partly with the wind. Darrell on point, riding solely by sense of direction, since all distant landmarks were blotted out, led them in a straight line over the dunes.

In the white twilight they traveled steadily, while the sun sank in the West, its passage only hinted at in the pale glow that might have been the ghost of a real sun. The howling of the wind by now had grown to a steady roar. For long minutes at a time they were unable to make progress, were barely able only by the greatest effort to keep the herd together.

Windy Tolliver came up alongside Darrell on one of these stops. "Where you ridin', fella?" he shouted.

"To a canyon over here between that pair o' rock ridges."

"A old ranch? With a old rock house in it?" asked Windy.

"Yes," replied Darrell, surprised. "How come, yuh know about it? Been in this country before?"

WINDY TOLLIVER only stared, opened his big mouth as if to speak, and then silently dropped back.

For a moment Darrell wondered about Windy's questions, but he had more immediate worries. Behind him, the herd was drifting out of control, and he raced back to help the riders, joined them in their swift dashes over the dunes, straightened them out again.

Before them was rising a gray outline of a rock, a shark fin ridge that rose high above the white drifts like a coral island above an ocean. This was the first of two ridges with a deep canyon-like trough between; the canyon was to be the temporary haven for the Malone herd.

An hour and they were at the lower end of the canyon, and the only entrance into it. By a good deal of hard riding, the weary cattle turned once more into the wind and headed up the canyon bottom. As they proceeded up it, the sloping walls became higher

and narrower. And as the walls grew in height, the drifts of white sand grew less deep and finally stopped entirely. Near the end of the canyon, where the ridges joined to block egress, they came to the deserted little rock shack.

Judging by the looks of the place, Cherry knew that the ranch here had never been a prosperous one. The range outside of the canyon was entirely covered by dunes of sand; there were too few acres in the canyon itself to support many cattle. The owner finally must have given up in disgust, abandoning his ranch to the slow drifting over of banks of snow which no sun would ever melt.

At the upper end of the canyon the wind was a mere whisper of what it had been on the mesa. Safe from the fury of the storm it seemed like Heaven to riders and cattle and horses alike.

Night was already dropping, a night that was to be only a little darker continuation of the day's twilight.

THEY made camp near the house, found a few sticks of wood and built a fire. The herd was shoved on up the canyon, to be held against the joined walls of the two ridges. Here were a few acres of grass that no stock had grazed on for many years. The starving cattle fell on it hungrily, eating it down to the roots.

"All we need is a Moses to strike water from a rock," said Darrell as he rode up to Cherry. The camp fire threw tantalizing glints over the thick curly hair of her bare head. "Hope this storm quits tonight. Otherwise it'll give time for Rawls' gang to get up their horses and come trailin' us for a battle."

"If it's a battle, you'll have your wish—to meet those men," she reminded him, and Smoke Darrell nodded grimly.

They gathered around the small fire, made coffee with the water that had been gathered in kegs when the reservoir had broken and packed on mules when they had abandoned the wagons.

Outside of the canyon the storm still howled, with a fury that seemed to increase with each hour. They could hear it roaring in the scrub trees that grew under the rims of the canyon above them. As long as it continued, they would be held here helpless with their cattle. And storms had a way of continuing on the white sands. Without water the cattle, already thirsty, would again soon be suffering all the terrible agony of the desert.

Darrell stationed a guard at the canyon entrance, to watch for a possible foray by Rawls. Near here in the fine drifts of the White Sands he and Cherry found a strong seep of water coming out of a drift of the gypsum. It presumably came from some place in the canyon above. Where it emerged of course it was too deeply impregnated with "gyp" to be used.

"If we just had that water before it touched the sands," said Cherry. "And if we had a company of U. S. cavalry to keep off Rawls—I think I'd be almost happy."

The night passed and the day came without sunrise. On the mesa and in the lower canyon again the wind howled with undiminished fury. In the upper canyon by the rock house they could hear its steady roar through the stunted pines under the rimrocks.

CHAPTER VIII

WATER—AND AN ATTACK

NEVER in the memory of old Sandy Starr had he seen such a storm, and Sandy had seen hundreds of them and all

kinds—from blizzards in Wyoming to dust storms in the deserts of Old Mexico. All night and the next day, the next night and the following day, the continuous sweep of the drifting white walls, driven by a hurricane, went on without slackening.

The cattle milled uneasily and tried to move out of their shelter. They were again suffering the torture of thirst. At the Rawls' ranch their bodies had been unable to absorb enough water to make up for their long dry drive across the desert.

The kegs of water began to give out and the herders went on short rations. So far the storm gave no sign of abating, and the only sign of water in the canyon was the bitter seep that came through the white sand drift. After their release they would have the long trek the rest of the way across the Sands and the long dry journey from the Sands to the ranch at the foot of the mountain.

Each additional hour the wind held them made that trip more impossible. The poor brutes might well have been in a deep pit from which there was no climbing. Plainly they were once more dying of thirst, this time in the middle of the White Sands, getting weaker hourly and the chances of their making the journey becoming less and less.

THE strain began to tell on the trail crew. They avoided each other's eyes and listened with a growing despair for a lessening in the roar of the wind along the canyon rim.

Sometimes Cherry Malone thought she could hear human voices in the howling of the wind. The shrieks of people who had become lost and had died in the storms of these White Sands, whose bodies had been covered by the shifting powdery particles, uncovered perhaps twenty years later as skeletons with ragged remnants of clothes attached to the bleached bones. The bones of daring Spanish explorers, of Indians, of hardy bearded prospectors, and smooth-faced young cowboys, hungry strayed cattle — all overwhelmed while seeking a way across the treacherous drifts.

Once, said Windy Tolliver—so the story he had heard went—a wagon train of gold-seekers, already almost dead of thirst, taking a short passage across the Sands, had been marooned among the high dunes; had died to the last soul.

Cherry Malone, listening to these grisly tales about the Sands, shuddered a little and took care to keep close to the camp fire, and particularly close to the cowboy who had taken charge of the herd. When he went to the lower end of the canyon to stand his shift at guard, she went along and stayed with him. Which was jealously noted by Windy Tolliver. Windy, for some unexplained reason, was the only cheerful person in the trail crew. Occasionally his big mouth twisted as if he were enjoying some secret joke. These grins grew broader as the storm continued.

ON the third of the long, dragging days, just as Darrell was coming off guard, he, with old Sandy Starr and Cherry, saw a single horseman beating through the storm toward the canyon. Darrell identified him as the thick-headed lieutenant of Rawls, Torp. The man saw them at the same time and whirling his horse around, fled.

Cherry saw both Sandy and Darrell raise and then lower their rifles. To shoot an enemy in the back might be in the code of the feudists of the Eastern mountains, but not in the code of the Westerner.

"His seeing us means we can ex-

pect trouble in chunks?" asked Cherry.

"You're right," agreed Darrell. "I had hoped the wolves would keep to their den in this storm. They'll be here in a pack."

"'Twon't make much difference now," said Starr. "Our goose is cooked anyhow. 'Pears to me the wind is lettin' up a leetle, but it's too late for us. Rawls' gang'll be in here afore it quits an' bottle us up. Another day without water for these cows an' we could never move 'em outa these Sands, anyway."

CHERRY," said Darrell slowly, "maybe we'd better leave these cows to Rawls to try to get back to his ranch. Some of them may pull through."

"Quit?" faltered Cherry. "You mean give up?" Her hand went out to take Smoke Darrell's arm. His hand closed gently over hers.

"Looks bad, Cherry. "Like—almost—we're licked. I said almost. We can save ourselves — push on across the Sands—if we start before Rawls' men get here."

They went back to the rock house and talked it over with the others. Their situation was hopeless. To stay meant no help for the cattle, meant only endangering their lives. If they only had water—

The big round-faced Tolliver moved over to Cherry's side. "What did I tell you?" he muttered. "Yore friend Smoke has got us in a bog and can't pull us out. I kin. My offer still holds good. I kin save those cows if yuh'll give me yore promise." He sounded so convincing that, wild as was his claim, the girl suddenly half-believed him.

Hoping to string him into giving her a hint at least of what he was driving at, she ridiculed him. "I know you're bluffing, Windy. Bluffing. You haven't got any way."

But Windy shrewdly refused to give away his secret. Disappointed, the girl sought out Darrell. "Windy knows something," she told him. "Something about this place, I believe. I remember that years ago his people were over in this White Sands country for a while; he might have been at this very ranch."

"Windy asked me on the way here if I was heading for a ranch with an old rock house on it," said Darrell. "And so he claims he's got some secret that would save us even now, has he? And won't tell you unless you promise to marry him? Cherry, the only thing that can save us is water.

"I've explored these White Sands while camped here, and I've never found any water on them except the poisonous seep at the lower end of this canyon. And yet the ranch here had water at one time. Or else it would never have been started."

His brows knit. "There was once water here. Some place in this canyon. That water we see below must come from these rock walls, but we've got no time to waste hunting for it."

HE took three strides toward Tolliver, caught the big cowboy by the arm, whirled him around. And as Windy turned, Darrell's gun came out to be jabbed into the cowboy's middle.

"All right, talk, fella!" ordered Smoke. "Talk fast and straight or we'll send yuh out to join Rawls' coyotes. How about this water?"

Windy's eyes half popped from his head. "W-W-Water!" he stuttered. "I don't know nothin' 'bout no water. I was just jokin'."

"Listen," said Darrell sternly. "You lived here once. And once there must have been a spring on this ranch. There's ways of killing springs; forcing the water to come

out somewhere else. The Indians used to play that trick. I'll give you a minute to take me to that spring, savvy? If not, out you go afoot, down this canyon where you belong—to join the other bunch—Rawls and his men."

"I—I—" stammered Windy Tolliver, his face paling. "I don't know nothin', I tell yuh. I—"

MARCH!" ordered Darrell, and he started the big fellow down the canyon. Windy knew he would get short shrift from Buck Rawls, that even if he escaped the outlaw, afoot he would be overwhelmed by the storm and drifting sands.

"Wait!" he yelled frantically, and he turned, and on a half-trot led the way back through the herd to a cliff wall which had been broken and weathered, leaving little deep passage-ways back into the rock. Panting a little from fear of Darrell's gun, he clambered up over three low ledges and stopped at a pile of broken rock lying against the cliff.

"The old spring come outa here," he explained. "The bunch that lived here, they covered it over when they left. There's caves back in there with deep tanks of water in 'em. The ranchers damned up the hole the water used to flow out of, and now the water rises to a crack in the rocks and sinks down to come out below where you see the seep. The bunch here give it out that the springs had gone dry on 'em."

"That the truth?" demanded Darrell sternly. "If it isn't, I'll kill you, Windy."

"It's the truth, so help me God," said Windy with the earnestness of one being sworn in as a witness.

Leaving two men stationed as guards near the canyon entrance, they hastily brought up the picks and shovels which had been packed on muleback to use in digging for water. Grimly they set to work on the pile of stones which Windy had pointed out.

Shoving back the rubble, they came to the naked cliff itself, and a roughly-hewn slab of rock, which had been cemented in a hole of the wall. This they attacked at once, pecking away at the holding cement, breaking it up bit by bit, taking turns, working like mad.

The cement had been none too well mixed. As it crumbled beneath their blows, they finally got a pick point between the rock slab and pried it out. It left a narrow opening into the cliff approximately three feet square.

Smoke poked in his head. There was a cave or a series of them, as Windy had declared, low-ceilinged, extending for an unknown distance. From the darkness came a grateful moist smell, and as he lit a match, the rays revealed a pool of gleaming water.

HE tossed in a rock; it plunked with the satisfying sound made by a deep pool. More, he saw directly before him, lying in the water the end of a bent length of thick iron pipe. This he realized at once had been used as a siphon to conduct the water out of the cave tank into a rocky little creek bed which led down the canyon. Through that pipe could pass enough water to satisfy the Malone herd of white-faces.

Filled with water, its ends plugged, the pipe was stuck into the pool so that it projected through the cave aperture. When the ends were unplugged, immediately a flow of water started.

"We got it!" said Darrell. "Water! We can stick it out for a week if we have to. Let Mr. Rawls come."

As an echo to his invitation, came the distant explosion of a rifle, fired three times rapidly. The

signal agreed on with the guards. Other guns crashed. Rawls' men had already come and were starting an attack.

Buck Rawls, once the herd had been located by Torp, had wasted no time. The storm was slackening, making possible the moving of the cattle. Unaware of course of the cave pools, he realized they must be started for his ranch at once, while they were still able to move. Otherwise the herd would be lost completely to him.

The great storm gave him his chance to wipe out the Malone crew entirely, with no danger of murder charges being placed against him. It would be accepted that the herd and herders both had perished in the storm.

Meanwhile, he could blot the brands of the cattle and sell them. It was all safe—if the Malone crew were wiped out to the last person, even to the girl. No one was to be left to tell the story of the massacre. To carry out this cold-blooded scheme, he and his men, leading their horses, were now slipping up the canyon intending to finish it all in a whirlwind attack.

CHAPTER IX

Until the White Sands Melt

THE crashing of the guns in the canyon increased to a booming, deafening chorus. Rawls' men were coming with a rush. Darrell's two guards were being forced to retreat hastily to the rock house.

"Sandy, you pick half the men and take the left side of the canyon," called Darrell to Starr. "I'll take the right. Spread out and hold 'em."

Hastily the Malone crew hunted cover to form in a rough line across the canyon. Their rifles shortly got into action. The oldsters like Sandy, who had all been in similar battles, shot deliberately but accurately. Rawls' bunch, sweeping up the canyon, yelling, shooting as they came, struck a sudden snag. The rifles booming out from the line of hidden men ahead, brought down two of the attackers, causing the rest to jump for cover.

Plainly the attempt to sweep the canyon had failed, and Rawls' men had learned to respect the rifles of the old-timers and the younger riders also. Big Casino and Little Casino, hotly eager for a chance to shoot down the gang who had murdered their father, were lying close to Sandy Starr, patterning their actions after the old buffalo hunter.

DARRELL, after opening his mouth to order the boys back out of danger, closed it again. Those two kids had a right to get into this fight, and their help would be valuable, used as they were to handling firearms from the time they were big enough to carry them. This cold-blooded attack went back to old frontier days, when whole families, from four-year-old boys up, united to beat back Indian attacks.

Realizing this, how could he even order back Cherry Malone? The girl, lying outstretched behind a rock near him, firing her carbine occasionally, was as cool-headed as Sandy Starr. He swore at the danger to which the girl was put, but he knew it would be a waste of breath to ask her to go back.

"Keep down," he implored, as he crawled over to her. "Those birds can really shoot."

"Keep down yourself, cowboy," she returned. "Don't forget you're over six feet, and it takes a mountain for you to hide behind."

During a lull in the firing, his hand came out to meet hers. "Cherry," he said, "if anything happens to me, I

want you to know how much I love you. I'd even quit the trail of my father's killers if you asked it."

Her hand tightened, clung. "That goes from this side, Smoke," she told him. "I'd do anything for you that you'd ask."

FOR a moment the sound of scattered shots were wiped out, and cowboy and cowgirl were in a world of their own, the same sort and inhabited by the same number of people as that world of the ancient Garden of Eden.

Including the snake, Buck Rawls.

Sandy Starr's gun burst out in a rapid rattle of shots, and Big and Little Casino's, Dick Rutledge's and Joe Burnham's rifles joined in. Rawls' men were trying to crawl Indian fashion up the canyon. For a few moments screaming bullets filled the air. Darrell joined in from his side, helped by the two teamsters, Dan Brawley and Mort Smith, and Cherry.

Then they were forced to keep low. Shots were thudding in, a terrific hail that slapped viciously into the rocks about them, to ricochet off with the loud whirring buzzes of misshapen bullets.

They were outnumbered, even counting the girl and the two boys. If they were able to keep their line unbroken, however, they had enough water and food and cartridges to withstand a long siege. But let one man get behind them and it would mean disaster. And if night brought on real darkness instead of the twilight of the flying white particles, their only chance was to hole up in the stone house.

But Buck Rawls evidently was not intending to wait until night; he was determined to win this battle now. Undaunted by the still figures of the two dead men left in the sandy bottom, they pushed up close, snaking among the rocks, taking advantage of every bit of cover.

They ran into a stone wall of defense. A third of Rawls' men were hit and the rest were slow to advance. Another lull came in the firing.

On the left Sandy Starr, who had seen frontier days from buffalo hunting to Indian fighting, grunted and tied up a bloody arm with a strip torn from his shirt.

"Hey, where at's these here stretcher bearers and Red Cross nurses?" he shouted a complaint across to Darrell.

"They're coming right up, oldtimer," said Darrell. "You want to be more careful. You ain't shootin' buffalo now."

"Wisht I had my old Sharp's buffler cannon here, to let daylights through these polecats," said Sandy Starr. "That old rifle she'd shoot right through a four-foot 'dobe wall."

"Somebody's climbing the canyon above us," Cherry reported. "One or two men, I'm sure I saw, Smoke. But not long enough to get any shot at them."

SMOKE watched patiently, caught a movement himself. "Don't shoot," he warned her. "Let them think we haven't seen them. There's a narrow ledge up above: they figure to climb up to it and go along it to get behind us. Two can play at that game.

"I'm takin' me a extra six-gun and goin' up to try to deal that outfit some misery. Cherry, if I don't come back right pronto, and it comes to the worst, all of you hole up in that house and stick. Don't give up to these snake-bloods, no matter what terms they make. They aim to get rid of you all—and claim you were lost in this storm."

She nodded.

"We'll stick," she promised. "But

you be careful, Smoke, and come back."

"When I do," he warned her, "I'm coming back to stick around you until—until Hell freezes over and the White Sands melt."

"Until Hell freezes over and the White Sands melt, Smoke," she promised, and her warm lips met his in a kiss that sealed the promise.

Then he was gone, slipping quietly to the scraggly brush that grew on the slope of the lower canyon wall.

This was the last glimpse Cherry had of him, so quietly did he crawl upward to the ledge. The rifles of Rawls' men kept up a hot fire, but it seemed to her that they were only burning powder to cover up some other movement, perhaps to conceal the fact that half of them were climbing up to the ledge. And Smoke Darrell was climbing up alone to meet them. Smoke Darrell, alone.

FOUR men Rawls had decided was the right number to carry out the slick maneuver of climbing to the narrow ledge and getting to the rear of the Malone crew.

Buck Rawls himself went, and he had picked his two best fighting men and lieutenants to accompany him—the quick-draw two-gun artist, Doc Moore, and the thick-bodied Torp. With them went a little Mexican who, as active as a goat, led the way, picking out the easiest route up the steep canyonside.

Careful to dislodge no rocks, which, tumbling down the slope, would advertise their errand, they climbed steadily, pushing through the thick spiny brush until they topped out finally on the rocky shelf that clung to the cliff. For a moment after their climb they rested, listening to the sound of the busy rifles below.

"It's all over but the hog stickin'," boasted Rawls. "We got 'em bottled in here, and while the boys hold 'em at the front, all we got to do is pick 'em off from the back. But I'd like to save that girl. She's a looker. I never seen no filly to match her."

"You keep nobody, boss," said Torp positively. "Keep one and it means we may all hang for this. This San Christobal country is tough, but it ain't tough enough to stand for no wholesale massacreein'."

"Torp's right, for all of his thick head," chimed in the whipstocked Doc Moore. "Dead men tell no tales, and the same goes for girls with cherry lips, curly reddish hair and long-lashed blue eyes. There's plenty of women in this world, Buck, but me, I got only one neck."

RAWLS shrugged his shoulders. "All right," he agreed. "Put a bullet in her along with the rest. Let's git movin'."

The going was easier along the shelf, until they came to a section piled with broken rock fragments split off from a cliff above. The Mexican, still in the lead, started clambering up over the rubble. Torp followed, with Moore next and Rawls bringing up the rear.

"We're a'most far enough back by now; let's have a look below," said Rawls. As Rawls turned for his "look-see," the Mexican up ahead gave a cry.

"What's wrong? Step on a rattler?" asked Doc Moore, and then seeing the Mexican was bringing up his gun, he swore. "Don't shoot, you fool!" he ordered sharply. "It'll warn these Malones where we are, and—"

His words were broken off by the roar of a gun. It was not the Mexican's gun, however; it came from a six-shooter held by the man he had met.

The Mexican toppled and slid back

down the little incline of rock fragments, face turned toward the sky, blood running from a bullet hole in his chest. And as he slid back there was revealed the face of Smoke Darrell, a six-shooter in each paw.

"All right, you killers, start your massacre!" said Darrell.

WHAT followed then was a turmoil of fast action, of crashing guns—all in time that was measured by split seconds.

"Git him!" said Torp behind the Mexican, and his thick hand darted down for his gun. "Git—" said Torp, but the words died in his throat as one of Darrell's guns spoke again. Torp, hit through the throat, went back, to fall on top of the Mexican's dead body.

Doc Moore, at the first shot, had whipped up the pair of guns from his holsters. The weapons in his skilled hands sent out jetting twin streams of lead and flame, as they had roared the death of men so often before. But a second before they exploded, Darrell's raised guns spat out. Doc Moore's guns went off from reflex muscles that pulled the triggers, but the impact of Smoke's shots had jerked the barrels upward, sent the shots through Darrell's hat.

Moore himself, hit full in the heart, took two staggering steps and fell dangerously close to the lip of the edge. His empty hands seemed to claw feebly once or twice for a hold, and then his body, sliding down over the rocks, struck a little cliff and hurtled down over it.

Buck Rawls, alive to his danger and next in line, was already in action when Darrell got to him. Rawls' first shot, snapped hastily at Smoke, was aimed at his heart. Instead, it struck Darrell in the left arm, slashed through the outer muscles, disabling him on that side. His right-hand gun answered Rawls'. The bullet struck the rancher in the shoulder, toppled him backward, just as a shot from Rawls' second gun smacked into a rock at Darrell's feet.

Buck Rawls was not yet done; he stumbled back, fell to his knees, trying to fire again. Another bullet from Darrell's guns hit him in the side, and a final one from the avenging irons tore along his head, knocking him out cold.

Rawls lay so still that Darrell left him like the others—for dead. It was an hour later when Rawls came to.

He was in a bad way. He craved water as he had never craved anything before. Weakly struggling back to his feet, he started the descent to the canyon bottom, hoping to rejoin his men. Every step he took was torture to his smashed shoulder and wounded side, and each step left its mark of lost blood.

ON the canyon bottom he found that his men had pulled out, taking all the horses with them. He swore at them for leaving him. There was nothing left for him but to try to walk back to his ranch, across the White Sands. Blood was still dripping from his shoulder and side when he came to the drifts of the White Sands.

The wind was blowing with half its former force now. A hundred yards, two hundred he staggered over the stretch of endless white, and then his strength gave way, and he took a stumbling step and fell. He propped himself on his elbow.

Around him lay the devilish white dunes and the little valleys between them, looking for all the world like so much snow. It must be snow, thought Buck Rawls. Snow that could take the place of water for which every cell of his body called, as it had called in the bodies of thousands of cattle his men had lured

into the desert. He leaned down to lick it and then stopped.

Before his failing eyes the white below him seemed turning crimson. This could not be snow after all, these crimson particles. He could not understand it, not knowing that drops of blood running into his eyes were coloring all things red. And then Buck Rawls was suddenly past realizing anything. The fine particles drifted up over him: by morning there was a high drift over his body.

SMOKE DARRELL meanwhile had slid down the canyonside, holding his injured arm close to his side. Near the bottom he met Cherry Malone, fearful of the result of the gun battle she had heard, climbing determinedly up to meet him.

"Rawls' men have gone," she said, "so I knew you had won. But I was afraid they had got you, too."

"It was mostly luck they didn't," he admitted. "Luck and their not expecting to run into me." She exclaimed at sight of his bloody arm, but he only grinned. "I'm all right. This arm may be slowed up for a gun, but I'm hopin' I never have to use one again. And Rawls and his pals won't trap any more trail herds.

"Cherry," he went on, "so far our trails have been filled with a heap of trouble. If you'll let 'em go together, I'll try to fill 'em with a heap of happiness. Moore, Torp, Rawls are through. My job is done, and I'd like a plumb new one—of making you happy, Miss Cherry Malone."

"Wanting a new job so soon?" she said teasingly. "You must like jobs."

"I'm going to like this job a lot better than the other one. If you'll give it to me."

She clung to him, laughing, crying, all in the same breath. "Smoke—how can I answer when I don't even know your first name?"

"Daniel it is, ma'am," he said. "Same as the gent who went into the lions' den and came out again. But people mostly know me as Smoke."

"I like it better, too. Smoke, can you lend me your shirt to cry against. I just can't help crying—I'm so darned—so darned happy."

SMOKE'S good arm closed about her, drew her close, while his lips lowered to crush down on hers. For Cherry Malone all the terrible menace of the desert and the White Sands faded into a dream.

"I want to belong to you, Smoke," she whispered. "To belong to you—until the White Sands melt!"

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Wallace leaned forward, clutched the girl tightly.

Death Rides the Dragontooth in this Compelling Romance of the Hills

A Complete Novelette

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Author of "Babs the Untamed," "The Sport of Kings," etc.

THE MORNING SUN broke like a poisonous copper ball over the jagged Dragontooth Hills off to the East, and its heat was sudden and stifling. A slithering gray rattlesnake glided out from under a stone and coiled openly in the brassy glare. Somewhere in the sparse thicket two carrion crows quarreled with rasping squawks.

In the meager growth of sagebrush Dick Wallace stamped out the few remaining coals of his little fire and stood listening, his tin cup still full of bitter black coffee. Sudden silence descended on the thicket. The already-loaded pack horse neighed apprehensively, then stamped on the ground.

Wallace felt it; some sixth sense warned him against trouble. The sudden stillness, the very atmosphere itself breathed danger.

The cowboy stood alertly—listening. Feet apart, his cup in his left hand, his right hanging in an easy pose beside the worn leather holster at his hip. Scarcely moving his head, his eyes darted around the small clearing where he had slept.

His saddle horse stopped nibbling at the dried mesquite, threw up his head and looked around with ears sharply forward, eyes restless.

SOMETHING silent, something dangerous lurked in that heat-ridden clump of sage. Hidden eyes! Wallace felt them. His muscles went taut.

Then back of him a foot crunched a dried twig. Wallace spun around, hand digging for his gun.

The muzzle of a weapon gleamed in the sun-barrel pointed squarely between his eyes. The hand that held it was steady, protruding from a thick clump of sage at the edge of the small clearing.

The finger was tightening on the trigger of the strange weapon. A voice came from the bush.

"Don't touch your gun! And put your hands up!"

Wallace's hand came to a halt just as his fingertips touched the black handle of his weapon. His body froze still in utter surprise.

The voice that came from the sage was a girl's voice!

The sense of relief that flooded Wallace left him trembling. Another second and his weapon would have peppered the bush with lead. The black coffee sloshed over the side of his tin cup as he elevated his hands slightly.

"You should'a spoke sooner," he said warningly. "I might'a shot."

The girl kept her weapon trained squarely at Wallace as she stepped out from behind the sage. The cowboy looked at her closely, more surprised than before. He laughed in nervous relief.

But there was no laughter on the girl's face. Scarcely more than five feet in her riding boots, a wealth of black hair falling down in curly torrents over the back of a boy's shirt opened at the throat, a gun holster over faded blue overalls, she was a study in serious purpose. Large brown eyes glared purposefully at the cowboy, and still her gun never wavered.

Deadly earnestness burned in her face and her eyes narrowed ominously when Wallace smiled. "This won't be funny long," she said. "Turn around while I take your gun."

Standing well over six feet, broad of shoulder and narrow of hips, gray eyes keen from having spent an entire lifetime in the saddle, Dick Wallace smiled at the idea of anybody taking his gun. That had been tried down in Texas—

"Don't take it so serious," he said good humoredly. "It's too hot a day—"

THE girl's eyes grew colder and Wallace read the strength of character in her face.

He tried once more. "Besides, you're doing it wrong. You should make a fellow unbuckle his gun-belt and drop it on the ground. Then you order him to back away from it, careful-like. Leastwise, I've read that's the way—"

The girl's eyes sparkled with a glint of Irish wrath. "Shut up that smart talk," she snapped. "And you're going to tell me what you've done to my Dad. If you've killed him like you did—"

As she spoke, the girl was moving around Wallace, edging toward his rifle which leaned against a mesquite bush together with his blanket roll. But her eyes never left Wallace, nor did her gun waver.

Suddenly a hissing sound startled Wallace. His eyes darted to the ground. Then like lightning he acted.

His hand darted to his hip and his gun came out. It roared once. The girl jumped sideways.

Not a foot from where the girl had stood, a rattlesnake's six-foot body writhed in death agony. The girl saw the row of light-colored diamond shaped designs on the squirming reptile, and she leaned against a tree weakly. The gun in her limp hand hung toward the ground heedlessly.

"Better be careful where you step," Wallace cautioned. "Sidewinders seem kinda plentiful hereabouts."

He ignored the girl's gun while he drained his cup of coffee and replaced the shell in his own weapon and dropped it into his holster. "Now, what was you sayin' about me killin' somebody or other?"

THE girl's eyes held to the twisting snake, fascinated for a long moment. Then she turned and looked uncertainly at the man who stood before her, and from him to the little nickeled weapon hanging limply in her hand. Her lips trembled slightly. The incident of the snake had shaken her confidence momentarily, and she looked at her weapon as though she did not quite know what to do with it.

"I'd recommend that you put your gun away," Wallace said easily. "And just forget about that sidewinder. Snakes don't bother people that don't try to step on 'em."

The girl looked at him absently. "I don't suppose I could keep my gun on you now, could I? You could have shot it out of my hand any time—before I could have pulled the trigger, couldn't you?"

"Maybe. But would you mind tellin' me why you go around scrub thickets this early in the morning holdin' people up with a gun? Is that a regular game around here?"

The girl tried to hide a puzzlement that evidently engulfed her. She made an effort to recapture the spirit of resolve that had so suddenly deserted her.

"You ought to know why. It's that outfit of yours."

WALLACE glanced at his pack horse and his saddle pony.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you."

The girl's spirit flared up more quickly now.

"You're not fooling anybody, Mister Man," she snapped. "You're one of that Burney outfit or you wouldn't be here in Dragontooth Basin. And whether it was you or somebody else in your bunch don't matter, but you're all responsible for the killing and for my uncle—"

For the second time in the course of a few minutes Dick Wallace heard a command from the scrub. This time it came sharp and in a distinct bass voice.

"Get them hands up, hombre, an' keep 'em thar!"

The voice was behind him and Wallace lifted his hands this time without hesitation.

A man behind him walked out into the clearing.

"I got 'im covered, Miss Phyllis. Take 'is weapon."

The girl in the overalls stepped

forward now and lifted Wallace's gun while Wallace stood helpless with the feel of a weapon boring into his back.

"You shouldn't 'a been out, girl," Wallace's captor continued. "I been lookin' for you ever since I missed yore pony. This basin ain't safe now."

The man kept his gun on Wallace and stepped around in front of him, walking with one stiff leg. Then he uttered an explosive exclamation, stopping dead in his tracks and staring at Wallace.

"How in blue blazes did you get here?" he demanded, his face twisted in surprise.

"Pop Badger!" Wallace answered, relief in his voice. "You're a long way from the Concho yourself, you old coot."

They shook hands, the lanky old man grinning through his scraggly white mustache. The girl stood with her hands in her overalls pockets, speechless at the cordiality between old Badger and her prisoner.

Neither of the men were looking at her at the moment. The girl looked around quickly, then slipped back into a thicket of mesquite and disappeared.

When Dick Wallace next looked around, the sage had swallowed her up. Perplexity at all this mystery seized him for a moment.

THE cowboy could not shake off the feeling of forboding that gripped him. It was as though the very sunlight itself were rotten with evil, as though Dragontooth Basin were a steaming caldron of Hell's brew. Wallace felt it strongly, and he saw that the old man he had known in Texas was laboring under some similar feeling.

Badger settled himself down on a flat rock, his stiff leg sticking straight out, and looked off toward the purple hills to the Eastward.

"I thought you was doin' well down in Texas," he finally said. He looked at Wallace speculatively.

"I haven't any complaint," Wallace answered. "But I've been intending to come up this way on business for a long time, now. For a mighty long time."

There was something in Wallace's voice that caused the older man to look at him sharply.

"Oh," he said. "Reckon I remember now. Seems you used to do a heap o' practicin' with that six-gun o' yours. Had a idea all along that maybe you had somethin' in mind. Think you'll be around these parts long, or maybe driftin' on?"

WALLACE rolled a cigarette with careful attention. "From what I gather, I ought to be gettin' my business over pretty soon."

The old man grunted. "As I recollect the story we used to hear down in Texas, yore dad used to ranch up here in the territory until somebody called him outa his house one night an' shot him dead."

Dick Wallace took the big Colt .45 from his holster and handled it with his two hands. "Yes," he said slowly. "And this was his gun. And it's the gun that's going to cut down the man that did the killing.

"I was just ten years old that night this fellow called him out on the porch. I started to go out with him but he strapped on his gun and then made me stay in the house. He said there might be some trouble. And there was.

"We heard him talking and we heard the other party talking. Then one shot and after that several shots. The bunch rode off and I ran out with my mother. There was a little yellow patch where the lamp light from inside shown through the door onto the ground. And lyin' in the patch of light was my father. He

had a bullet right through his heart. And he was dead.

"The next day my mother and I put his body in a coffin and we drove all the way down to Texas and buried him with his brother. The trip almost killed my mother, but we got there. Maybe you don't know how that experience was stamped on my brain. But I do. And that's why I've been getting ready for years to come back to this country. I know who it was that killed him. The man I'm looking for is right here in Dragontooth Basin."

OLD POP BADGER cut off a piece of tobacco and put the plug back in his pocket thoughtfully.

"'Course, I don't know who your man is, but puttin' things all together-like, it might be you'd be interested in conditions here in the Dragontooth. Things might kind of hitch up together."

Wallace did not answer.

"You see," the old man said. "The outfit I'm with is in a peck o' trouble, an' it ain't their own fault. The ranch lies down in that hollow there, an' our land runs clean up to the foot o' that range o' hills.

An' them hills is the devil's own grazin' land, jagged an' sharp lava teeth, a' clean full o' hidin' places. It's honeycombed with as nasty a nest o' human buzzards as ever roosted in the wastelands.

"Feller named Burney—whole family of 'em, in fact—runs things in there on account o' bein' the worst o' the lot. An' his bunch has finally got so strong that they've just about run all the decent people out o' the country. Which is their idea. Tryin' to make their robbers' roost a kind o' thieves' paradise.

"Anyways, we didn't scare, an' the net result is the old man an' his brother, who runs our spread, is both gone. Killed, one of 'em is, and the other they got hold of last night after killin' three of our men. Probably gonna hold him hostage to bargain with, then kill him anyway.

"So, as I was sayin', if it might be that Burney lot you had business with—well, we sure could use a good gun-hand or so right now."

"Don't think I ever heard o' the Burneys."

The old man looked disappointed.

"Too bad. You sure could do a favor to old Jim Graves if—"

"*Who?*"

Badger looked up sharply.

"Jim Graves," he repeated slowly. "Him an' his brother ran the outfit I work for. It's Jim that them Burneys has got. *Why?*"

Dick Wallace felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. He got up and paced up and down the clearing to get his nerves under control. He did not trust his voice for several minutes.

The old man sat on the stone, silently watching him. Then Wallace turned and stood squarely in front of him. His face was drawn, tense.

"I won't let those Burneys kill Jim Graves. I'll take him away from them if it's the last thing I do. Just what part o' those hills will I most likely find them?"

II

DICK WALLACE loped his saddle horse down a gray ribbon of trail that stretched before him in the direction of the hills which danced in the heat like a shimmering mirage. Free of his pack horse which he had left in the thicket behind, his little animal's hooves beat a rhythmic tattoo in the dust, eating up the hot miles.

The animal clattered into a narrow arroyo, followed it until it became a regular gully with granite sides mounting higher and higher as he

traveled. The clicking of his horse's hooves pounded with the regularity of drumbeats that echoed back and forth between the stony walls of the trail. He was getting into the badlands.

His face set in grim lines, Wallace rode tense in the saddle. He forced every ounce of speed the animal could muster, racing against time.

The trail unwound before him, deeper now between the rocky walls, and more precipitous. The footing became perilous, changing abruptly to loose bits of greenish rock alternating with patches of sand. Cholla dotted the rising cliff-sides, an unhealthy green in the poisonous sun. An occasional grotesque mountain goat raised a curious head, then darted into the stony jungle, much like lookouts stationed as outposts of inferno.

THE animal clattered across the stony floor of a dip, passed into a deep, natural arena, a great crater floor sunk into a tumble of heat-baked lava ridges, dotted here and there with candelabra cactus. Overhead a dozen ugly buzzards wheeled and spiraled on lazy wings over the crater floor. Ominous hints to Wallace that he might be too late.

Suddenly the trail emerged from the hollow. Wallace jerked the animal out of his monotonous rhythm into an abrupt halt. His trail converged with another. The other trail was occupied!

A horseman emerged from behind one of the Dragontooth masses of rock and at the sight of Wallace pulled his own animal up short.

The picture registered on Wallace's brain instantly and his gun came out blazing! Dangerous shooting, but the only possible way out. For the man was not alone on his horse. Held in the saddle before him, the girl with the black hair and overalls squirmed in the man's grasp.

Wallace shot before the man could pull his horse around facing him, and thus get the girl between them for his defense. His gun roared and the blast echoed back and forth from wall to wall of the stones.

Taken by surprise, the man on the black horse was a moment late getting his gun out. It never left his holster. Wallace's single bullet had ploughed through his ribs, drilled his heart and lungs.

The man sat poised still a moment, shock written on his dark face. Then he slowly crumpled sideways, slid from the animal, and rolled over in the dust.

THE horse stood still a fraction of a moment, paralyzed with fright. Then he reared upward and voiced his panic. He wheeled on his hind legs and hit the ground running.

The girl astride the animal swayed dangerously, fought to regain her balance. Keeping her head, she wrapped her arms around the animal's neck and clung to him, grasping at the same time for the trailing reins.

The animal headed directly toward what appeared to be a flat. But Wallace, having a good view, instantly saw the danger. A narrow canyon lay directly across the path, a sunken crevice, as though some great knife had cut a ten-foot slash in the earth. At his present rate of speed, the animal would have no choice except to try to hurdle it.

The girl saw the danger, too, and she doubled her fist and pounded on one side of the animal's neck and head in a futile effort to turn him. But stark fear blinded him and he sped head on.

Wallace instantly spurred his own pony forward, quirting the last ounce of energy out of the wirey animal who responded with a fresh burst of speed.

Tense, the cowboy guided his horse around heavy boulders, through cactus and loose stones, almost hopelessly racing against fate, for the black horse with his helpless rider was fully three lengths nearer the edge of the canyon than his own.

Wallace leaned over his animal's neck and laid on the quirt. Fifty feet beside him the black animal kept his head down and raced toward the gap.

Slowly, only inch by inch, Wallace crept up, keeping his horse's head still in the direction where the two animals should meet at the brink of the canyon.

The girl looked around, her face white and frightened, almost hopeless. Then she pounded with renewed energy on the side of her horse's head, but the animal kept his direction.

NOW Wallace was within ten feet of the runaway, a little to the side and a full length to the rear. He laid the quirt on his horse until the blood came and the animal found a little more energy, another ounce of speed, game animal that he was.

The canyon lay before the speeding animals and now the black horse saw it. He raised his head slightly, saw it was too late to turn. He lowered his head and lengthened his gait preparatory to trying to hurdle the ten-foot width of the chasm. The girl saw the gap and closed her eyes, burying her head in the horse's neck as though to shut out the sight of danger.

Wallace's horse's head came alongside the saddle of the black horse, nosed forward by inches until they were head and head.

Wallace leaned forward over his horse's neck and reached out. His hand grasped the girl's shirt, slipped around her waist, clutched her tightly.

In a single movement he lifted her bodily from the black animal, at the same time jerking up the reins of his own bridle. The girl swung in midair as he lifted her off and dropped her into his own saddle before him.

His pony felt the pressure of the reins and wheeled sharply, at the same time digging his sharp hooves into the ground in a flurry of dust and a grinding of small stones, pebbles that went clattering down into the deep canyon a scant half dozen feet before them.

The black horse, free of his burden, closed the space before him and jumped. His fore feet pawed the far edge of the chasm, his hind feet missed. The animal screamed in terror and his hind legs floundered, pawing the air for a footing, then thundered downward into the ditch, buckling a leg underneath his body. He screamed in agony as he tried to get up on his broken leg and the small cascade of stone and dirt rained down on him.

Wallace sat on his horse with the girl clinging to his neck. Both were speechless as they watched the horse in the ditch, where if the cowboy had been a few seconds slower the girl would have been piled with the kicking and wounded animal.

Wallace's own horse stood trembling with the excitement and the exertion, and Wallace slid off him, still holding the girl as though she had been a child in his arms, a child who was still speechless and who looked around her in a dazed sort of way.

WALLACE looked at the girl in his arms and saw her more clearly than he had seen her earlier in the morning. She was not quite as young as her small size had first led him to believe, but she was decidedly pretty, and it was decidedly

pleasant to be holding her in his arms.

His brain seemed to have stampeded; he wasn't thinking clearly, but was giving way to an emotion that was new to him. An emotion that was pointing out how lonely his life had been, one that left him somewhat confused.

The girl seemed to suddenly become conscious that he was holding her in his arms. Her eyes returned from their absent wandering and she looked at him. Her eyes were dark brown, he noted, and were liquid. She smiled. Then she slid out of his arms and stood before him looking at him.

"You'd better sit down and rest," Wallace said after the spell of silence had lasted a moment.

The girl settled herself on a granite boulder and made room for Wallace beside her.

"It looks like you've walked into a job of being my guardian," she said. "And I'll be finding it necessary to think of new ways to thank you, if this keeps up."

"Maybe it won't keep up very long. And my name's Dick Wallace. Dick to my friends."

"I know it, Dick," she answered provocatively. "And I should have recognized you this morning. But it's been so long since we've seen each other, I guess you don't remember me. At least, you aren't acting like an old friend should act."

WALLACE looked away with a quick surge of discomfort.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

The girl seemed not to notice the sudden change in him. "When I heard Pop Badger call your name I was so surprised and embarrassed that I slipped away before you'd recognize me and laugh at me. You used to laugh at me all time, you remember."

Wallace gave no indication that he remembered. The girl hesitated momentarily, then continued.

"Anyway, I started back to the house and, before I got out of that scrub thicket, Flint Burney had me abducted. I fought with him but it didn't help me any. He's one of that Burney crowd that's been stealing our cattle. Dad and Uncle and our men have fought with them for two years and there's been killing on both sides.

THEY killed Uncle Joe yesterday and caught Dad. That was what I was doing out—looking for some trace of Dad. They'll torture him, and maybe kill him."

"Why?"

"They've driven all the other decent ranchers out of the neighborhood, but Dad and uncle wouldn't go. They want this land which is the gateway to their headquarters in the mountains. I guess they want to make Dad sign away his rights here. And I suppose Flint Burney caught me so he could threaten Dad he'd kill me if Dad didn't do what he wanted."

Wallace looked at the healthy loveliness of the girl and he found himself glad he had killed the man. The girl's face wore a troubled look in spite of her youthful freshness, and Wallace knew that he wanted to help her, to fight for her.

The girl was trying her best to be friendly and her efforts tortured the man.

"You don't seem glad to see me again," she said tentatively. "I don't believe you remember me at all."

Filled with his own painful thoughts, Wallace looked at her blankly, as though he hadn't heard.

She continued. "I was a little girl when your—" she stopped embarrassedly—"when you moved away.

But surely you remember the little Graves girl you used to tease when your dad used to come to see my father—when we both lived in Alto Palto?"

Wallace flipped his cigarette to the ground and stamped on it viciously. He got to his feet and looked about.

"Yes," he said. "I remember. You're Jim Graves' daughter, aren't you?"

"You don't seem any too pleased."

"I'm sorry," the man answered almost curtly. "But I've got to find your father. And find some way to get you back to your place before I go." He caught the reins of his bridle, and, leading his rested horse, started walking back toward the trail they had left on the mad dash. The girl fell into step beside him.

"But I'm not going back home," she said quietly. "I'm going with you to help you find Dad."

WALLACE caught his breath and looked at her strangely. The corners of his mouth were drawn down grimly.

"You can't," he said flatly.

"But I'm going to." Her voice was firm. Dick Wallace kicked a pebble with the toe of his boot and turned on the girl.

"And I said you are not. It's too dangerous, and besides—"

"Now you're quarreling with me. But it won't do you any good. Before you're through with me you'll find out you can't bully me any more now than you could when we were children."

Mixed emotions battled within the man and held him silent for a few paces. He could think of no answer to such obstinacy. It piqued him, made him angry, and at the same time aroused him to a pitch of added admiration for the girl. It almost made him hate the job he had come to the Dragontooth to do.

They trudged on in silence until they came to the convergence of the two paths where Wallace had met her and her captor head-on. As yet the man had thought of no way to get the girl safely home without wasting precious time, time that he needed if he were to find Jim Graves before those men back in the hills killed him.

The girl looked at the dead man grimly, then, kneeling beside him, she unbuckled his gun belt and also found her own little nickeled weapon where he had placed it in one of his pockets. She dropped her gun into its holster and, throwing the extra weapon and belt over Wallace's saddle horn, she vaulted lightly into the saddle.

When Wallace looked at her she almost smiled, but her mouth was firm. "We might as well get started now," she said. "Because you're not going to move a foot in the direction of those hills without me. Come on."

III

WITH the girl mounted in the saddle in front of him, Dick Wallace rode silently on the trail into the hills. The climb now became steeper, and the rocks, like sharp yellow teeth of some gigantic dragon of prehistoric times, dotted the heat-sick country. The sun blazed straight overhead from a sky that was an inverted oven.

For mile after mile of this wasteland they climbed, and not a sound came to their ears. Even the small animals had found the sultry day too much for them, leaving the landscape to an occasional rattlesnake coiled among the cactus.

They spoke little. The girl offered an occasional suggestion, to which Wallace returned a barely audible grunt, and finally she gave herself up to her own thoughts and left Wallace

to his bitterness. Thus they rode into the higher levels of the hills, where scrub oak and cholla and mesquite held their own with the boulders.

Wallace's horse sniffed and the man pulled him up abruptly.

"Woodsmoke," the girl said in a low tone, and slid off the horse.

Wallace led the animal to a mesquite clump and tied him out of sight of the trail. Then on foot the man and girl crept forward cautiously. At one point Wallace turned his head. "You don't go any farther." The girl made an impatient gesture and continued with him.

THEY worked their way cautiously through brush and boulders and soon came near the source of the smoke. Hidden behind sage clumps, they looked into a hidden basin.

Some two hundred yards before them was a waterhole, and beside it was an old cabin made of poles and chinked with mud, clumps of which the weather had worn until they had fallen away. The front of the cabin had two small windows, more like gun ports slitting the wall. Smoke curled from the mud chimney at one end of the warped building. Off to the left was a small pole corral in which nearly a hundred calves milled about in packed formation.

A man sat in a rawhide-bottomed chair which was tilted back against the outer wall of the house, within half a dozen feet of a frame door that hung half open, drooping on a lone hinge.

The man's hat was pushed forward so that it practically covered his face. As Wallace and the girl watched, the man removed a Winchester rifle that lay across his lap, leaned it against the wall of the house and rolled and lit a cigarette, then returned to his dozing.

But his rest was short-lived. A commotion started within the cabin, and the sound of it reached the man and girl hidden in the sage. A medley of angry shouts, mixed with the sound of banging solid objects floated out on the dead air.

The sleeper sprang up, grabbed his rifle and peered into the cabin. Whatever he saw, he backed away to one side. He flattened himself against the cabin front, crouched, and slung open the lever under the barrel of his rifle.

The noise inside the cabin increased. Curses and yells rolled out and echoed up the canyon.

And then a man burst from the door, fighting to escape the grasp of another whose arms encircled his neck and who tried to drag him to a halt.

The girl beside Wallace gasped.

"Dad!"

Wallace caught her arm and held her back as she tried to break cover of the sage and start toward her father.

GRAVES was large and powerful, dressed in range garb. The white hair on his massive hatless head was streaked with blood. But, wounded as he evidently was, he was a full match for the man who tried to hold him. Out in the open and with freedom of movement, he whirled around, sending his captor spinning through the air like a released flywheel.

As his attacker hit the ground on his back, Graves' heavy boot landed squarely in his face and left him cringing in the dirt. Without stopping to examine the results of the kick, Graves sprinted toward the edge of the clearing, heading almost directly toward Wallace and his own daughter.

Wallace watched him come, and as he realized that he was at last face to face with Jim Graves, he felt the

nerves in his whole body grow taut almost to the snapping point. There flashed through his mind some kind of a vague idea about a stream of water that had been damned up until the water got so high that the dam suddenly gave way with a thundering crash and the piled-up water escaped in great waves of boiling turbulence. His fingers wrapped tightly around the handle of his father's gun.

THEN another movement caught his eye. The guard in front of the house now had his Winchester trained on the running form of Jim Graves.

Wallace whipped out his gun quickly and fired, just as a white puff spouted from the rifle near the house. The Winchester fell from the hands of the man by the cabin and settled in the dust at his feet. Then the man staggered, gripped the wall for support, then slowly fell on top of his weapon—and did not move.

The noise had aroused other activity. While the reverberations of the shots rocked the canyon walls, two more men made their appearance, dashing up from somewhere in the neighborhood of the corrals.

Without giving more than a passing glance at their fallen friends, the two newcomers set out in pursuit of Graves who was nearing the edge of the clearing.

One of the men whipped out a pistol as he ran. He threw a hasty shot at Graves, so quickly that Wallace had no time to aim his own weapon.

Graves lunged forward as the bullet struck him. He slid along the ground with blood streaming from a fresh wound on his head.

The girl started forward from her concealment again, but Wallace jammed his gun into its scabbard and held her back. "They'd kill him for sure, the minute they saw you," he argued. "If he's only wounded we'll get a better chance to bring him out alive."

"But they might kill him anyway—"

"Not while I can help it," Wallace answered grimly. "You wait."

By now the two men had reached Graves who lay supine on the ground and were examining him. One of them placed an ear to Graves' chest, then spoke.

"Good thing you only creased him. He wouldn't do us much good dead."

The girl clutched at Wallace's arm in relief. They didn't want to kill her father—for a while, at least. Wallace drew a deep breath of thankfulness.

The man whom Graves had kicked in the face had recovered and now joined the other two over Graves. He looked down and started to kick the rancher when the man beside him grabbed him.

"Cut that out," the other ordered sharply. "Want to kill him? An' how come you let him get away?"

OBVIOUSLY the speaker was a man of authority in the clearing, for the other offered an eager explanation. "I couldn't help it," he said. "You tied him up, yourself. He musta worked the piggin' strings loose somehow. Anyways, I didn't know he was loose till he kicked me in the middle an' made a break for it. Then he kicked me in the face."

"You're a hell of a guard," the other sneered. "Go over and see what he done to Jake."

"Jake's dead—done shot with a Colt, looks like."

The man in authority, a rangy six-footer with a drooping mustache, swore and ordered the other two to carry Graves back into the house.

Wallace watched until the three had disappeared within the door, then he turned to the girl.

"See that cut bank runnin' near the back of the house?" he asked.

The girl nodded.

"I want you to stay here. I'm gonna try to make it around there without being spotted. When I get there, I'll see what I can do. And if you hear any shooting—" he looked at her sharply—"I want you to run for my horse and head back for your ranch. Do you understand?"

"I'll be here when you get back," the girl answered.

FOR half an hour Wallace crawled and squirmed his way around boulders and cactus, working closer and closer to the concealment offered back to the cabin. Sweat poured from his face and soaked his clothes, but he drove himself onward.

One thing and one thing only was on his mind now. He had forgotten the girl, forgotten everything except that those men in the cabin had Jim Graves. And Wallace wanted him for himself—alive.

Finally he rounded the last boulder and found himself amidst a jagged mass of rock back of the cabin. He slowly let himself down to the level of the basin without sending any warning pebbles before him, and darted to the back door, pressing himself into concealment beside it.

He had hardly arrived when he heard the pounding of hooves at the front. A horseman had ridden up and dismounted.

A voice came to him from inside the cabin. "There's Coats. He'll be roarin' when he sees his brother's killed. Come on." Footsteps indicated that the men had stepped out to meet the newcomer.

Quickly, Wallace seized the opportunity. He sprang inside the cabin, gun in hand and listened. Out front, he heard the three men all trying at once to explain to the newcomer the things that had happened.

Wallace saw the rancher, Graves, lying on a shakedown, new pigging strings tied securely to his hands and feet. Dropping his gun in its pouch, the cowboy whipped out his knife and cut the leather straps.

He shook the rancher easily. "Let's get going," he ordered. "Can you walk?"

He raised Graves to a sitting position, at the same time keeping his ear on the talk outside.

Graves shakily tried to get to his feet, then sank back with a groan, holding his hand to his wounded head. Wallace tried again to get him up by supporting him, but the rancher was too weak to stand.

"You've got to get out of here," Wallace said sharply. "They'll be back in a minute, and they're too many for us. Try it again."

Graves shook his head feebly. "Can't make it," he mumbled. "Too far gone, stranger. But thanks just the same. You get out while you can." He slumped in his chair.

Wallace panted with impatience. Outside, the conversation seemed to be easing off. Seconds were precious.

The cowboy made one more effort. He lifted the heavy rancher bodily and carried him toward the back door. He had nearly reached it when he heard men entering the front. He was caught.

He turned fiercely, trying to drag at his gun while he supported the weight of Graves' body.

A shot echoed in the cabin, Wallace sensed a savage crack on his skull, then tumbled down into blackness, carrying his burden with him.

WHEN Dick Wallace regained his senses he opened his eyes slightly. He was tied like a calf for branding, unable to move a muscle. He recognized the voice of the man who seemed to be in authority.

"I ought to kill you right now. You

killed my brother and four or five of my men. But, as I said, I'm givin' you a chance to git off with your life."

It was Jim Graves who answered. "I killed them buzzards when they were running off my cattle. And I'd do it again."

"You won't git the chance. Flint'll be along directly with that high-falutin' Tomboy gal you set so much store by. I think when we git through with her you'll be ready to clear out—purty pronto."

"If you coyotes lay a hand on her I'll wipe the bunch of you off the face of the earth if it takes to my dying day."

"Yore dyin' day's done come—less'n you're ready to deed me over that spread o' yourn. And the same goes for this yap with you. Who's he, and where'd he come from?"

"I never saw him before."

Wallace opened his eyes. "I'm just a travelin' puncher that got in the wrong place. It don't matter who I am."

His captor stood over Wallace. "You sure got in the wrong place, all right."

AS THE tall man spoke to Wallace, Graves, whose strength had returned somewhat, sprang suddenly. His hand jerked a gun from the holster of one of the men who sprawled idly in a chair rolling a cigarette. Graves covered the room with the weapon before anybody recovered from his surprise.

"Git those hands up, all of you," Graves bellowed.

The third man in the room made a pass for his weapon. Graves shot him squarely between the eyes.

"Back up against that door, you two," Graves continued. "I'm running this show now."

The men did as they were directed. Graves collected the guns and dropped them in a corner, then took a butcher knife from the table and ripped the leather thongs from Wallace's wrists and ankles.

"Get yourself a weapon, lad," Graves ordered.

Wallace saw his own gun and holster hanging on a peg across the room. It had been his father's gun—it was the one he wanted. He started across the room to retrieve it.

THEN the sharp roar of a rifle sounded outside the window of the cabin. A slug whistled in, fanned Wallace's cheek. Two more followed. At least two newcomers were outside.

Jim Graves poured a stream of lead out the window, and under cover of this activity the two renegades tumbled backward out the door and joined their friends before Graves could stop them.

Wallace grabbed his gun from its peg, then crossed the room and closed and barricaded the door. Graves knelt just inside the window, gun resting on the sill, peeking outward through a chink. Wallace looked at the man's broad back, then at his own weapon. There was bitterness on his face.

Graves, his eye glued to the chink, suddenly emitted a sulphurous oath. At the same time a voice outside shouted.

"Come out o' there, Graves, an' bring that hombre with you if you don't want this girl hurt."

Wallace saw through a chink that two of the men had somehow got hold of the girl and, one gripping an arm on either side, were leading her across the clearing.

The girl shouted.

"Don't do it, Dad. They intend to kill you anyway."

Something inside Dick Wallace hurt him terribly. He didn't try to analyze it, but the sight of the girl

out there between those two men, combined with the sight of her father's broad back within the room, the whole thing made him dizzy.

The girl outside fought valiantly, but the strong men scarcely needed to make an effort to hold her. Suddenly she twisted and sank her teeth into the wrist of one of the men. The man set up a howl and twisted about.

Wallace seized the opportunity and whipped his gun down on the man. He triggered a perilous shot, dangerously near the girl, but the training he had undergone for just this trip now stood him well. The man fell dead, still clutching the girl's arm.

The girl dropped to the ground with rare quick thinking and Wallace sent a second bullet to drill the other captor. Free from the men, the girl scrambled up and darted toward the house like a rabbit.

FROM somewhere in the scrub guns thundered. Lead rained on the mud-chinked cabin. And toward the running girl.

Hot now, and seeing red, Dick Wallace became a living fury. He filled his other hand with one of the weapons from the corner of the room.

Then he flung open the door and went out to meet flaming lead.

He walked in a slow and low slung crouch, and the guns from his two hands belched messages of death that brought answering shrieks from the edge of the thicket.

A bullet caught him in the shoulder and flung him to the ground heavily. He rolled over and lay prone, his left arm shattered and useless—his right hand still pumping lead.

Bullets plowed sand and dirt into his eyes. Another laid open his scalp and the gaping wound dribbled blood over his forehead to blind him. His gun still roared.

Somewhere through the red haze he heard many shouts, and the rattle of many weapons. Reinforcements! From somewhere! For somebody.

Then a body of horsemen, rifles waving, poured into the clearing. Leading them was a lean, white-haired man with one leg that stuck out stiffly in its stirrup. Pop Badger.

At the same moment the girl reached Dick Wallace and she dropped down beside him just as his head sank to the ground. Her hands gently lifting. . . .

THE world reeled around him; he tried to raise himself and found that he was too weak.... Pop Badger was coming. . . . He had told Badger things. . . . He still had his job to do. . . .

Dazedly he exerted the last ounce of his strength, dragged himself to his knees, his head hanging and his eyes filled with blood.

From somewhere . . . far off, it seemed . . . he heard the voice of the girl.

"Dick! Don't try to move. Please . . . It's all over now. . . ."

That job!

He pulled himself up, got to his feet somehow. The girl caught him. He shoved her away and staggered toward the cabin.

Through the red haze he saw a form as it emerged from the cabin. . . . Jim Graves. . . .

. . . A night ages ago. . . . A voice in the dark outside the old ranchhouse. . . . Jim Graves' voice . . . calling Wallace . . . words . . . shots . . . the elder Wallace dead where the pale light of an oil lamp made a yellow square on the ground . . . that long wagon ride . . . a nightmare . . . hell. . . .

Graves was approaching through the red haze, his form dim and shapeless.

"Lad, I don't know your name—"

Reeling, bleeding, Wallace answered. *"Wallace!* Dick Wallace. Does that mean anything to you? I'm the son of Ed Wallace *that you shot in the back."*

"Ed Wallace? Lad, he was my friend—"

"And you shot him in the back. Go for your gun, you dirty sneaking coyote."

As he spoke, the cowboy lifted his own weapon. He couldn't see it through the film of blood that dripped into his eyes, he could only make out the glare of a blood-red sun.

The weapon was heavy, heavier than he'd ever known it—his father's gun—before. It came up slowly—

Then the red glare of the sun went out. . . . It was dark—

"Catch him; he's falling!" The girl screamed.

Jim Graves, weak and stumbling from his own wounds, and Pop Badger, who slid from his horse, the two of them reached the cowboy as the gun fell from his hand and he sank into the scalding dirt.

DICK WALLACE regained consciousness and looked about, to find himself in the very pleasant room of a cool ranch house. And he heard a pleasant voice.

"It's about time you decided to live," Phyllis Graves said.

She was seated beside the bed, holding a cup of hot broth.

"Have I been out long?" he asked.

"Three days," the girl answered. "You and Dad, both."

"Oh!" Wallace felt a sudden desire to sink back into unconsciousness. "Don't die again," the girl said. "At least not until I deliver my message—and lecture."

Wallace tried to move, only to discover that his left shoulder and arm were in a plaster cast and his head completely swathed in bandages like a mummy. He weakly gave it up, satisfied to lie there and listen to the voice that thrilled him as nothing had before.

The girl continued. "It seems that you've been laboring under the impression that Dad killed your father. I oughtn't to forgive you for that, much less offer an explanation. But Dad's too sick to talk right now.

ANYWAY, everything is in the newspaper clippings Dad saved. You can read them when you get well enough. But what happened the night your Dad was killed was that my Dad went to warn your Dad, and while he was talking to him out in front of your house, a horse thief your dad had caught, but who had escaped, slipped up in the dark and fired the shot that killed your Dad.

"Dad set out chasing him. He formed a posse that was out a week before they caught him and hung him. And when Dad got back you and your mother had gone and he never heard of you again."

Dick Wallace felt an emotion go through him that brought him peace for the first time in his memory. He smiled through his bandages.

"I believe you," he said. "And I want to apologize for having been so hasty in forming conclusions. All except one. Phyllis looked at him questioningly.

"I formed a conclusion about you—"

"Much too hasty."

"Which I'm going to tell you about."

"No, you're too hasty. And you're starting to argue again."

"But I always win."

Which he did.

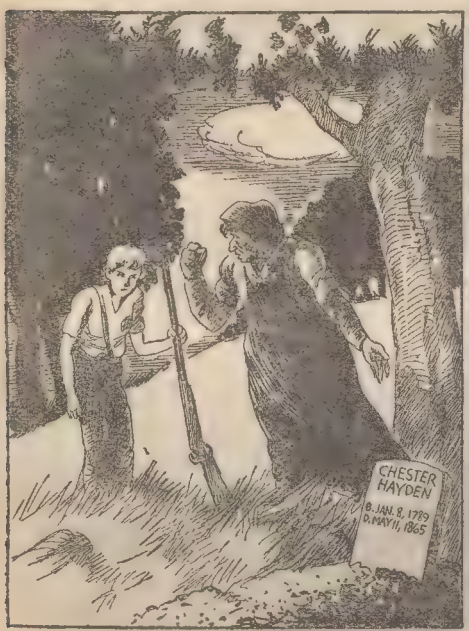
Turn to Next Page for THRILLING RANCH STORIES' Great New Zane Grey Super-Feature!

Zane Grey's "To the LAST MAN"

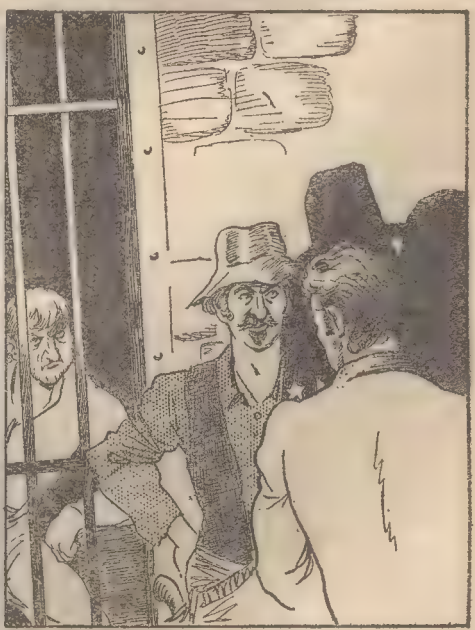
A pictorial novelization of the Paramount picture featuring Randolph Scott, Esther Ralston, and Jack La Rue, based on the famous story by Zane Grey

"Cursed be Jed Colby!" cries Lynn Hayden, on a fateful day in 1865, finding the body of his "Gran' pappy" on a lone mountain trail. The Hayden-Colby feud has waged bitterly in the Kentucky mountains. Another victim has been claimed by Colby's rifle.

The Civil War is over—Mark Hayden, Lynn's father, returns home. "Granny" pleads that the Haydens must be avenged. Mark turns a deaf ear to her; his is a vision of peace, he is resolved to end the feud by going west with two younger children.



Mark goes away, leaving Lynn to care for "Granny." She leads Lynn to the grave of "Gran' pappy," and there urges the boy to uphold the feud tradition that Mark has ignored. "An eye for an eye," she declaims. "Get Colby, young feller." Lynn vows that he will do as she asks.



Before leaving on the wagon train, Mark Hayden has gone to see the sheriff. "Jed Colby's done for my dad," Hayden has reported. "Put him in jail." The sheriff's comment to the charge is: "I guess I'm bound t' arrest him." Through a new procedure in feud cases, Colby is jailed for 15 years.

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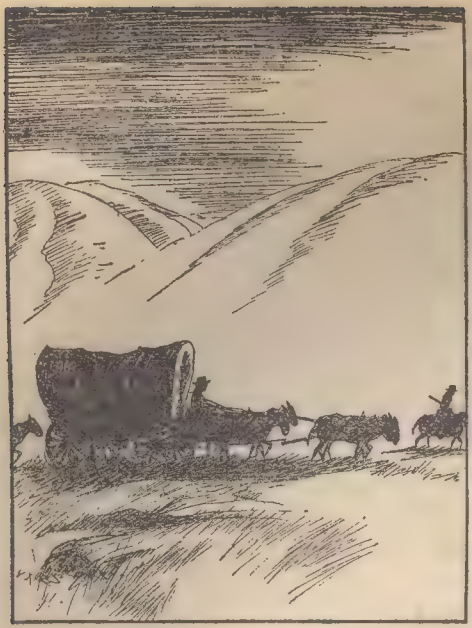
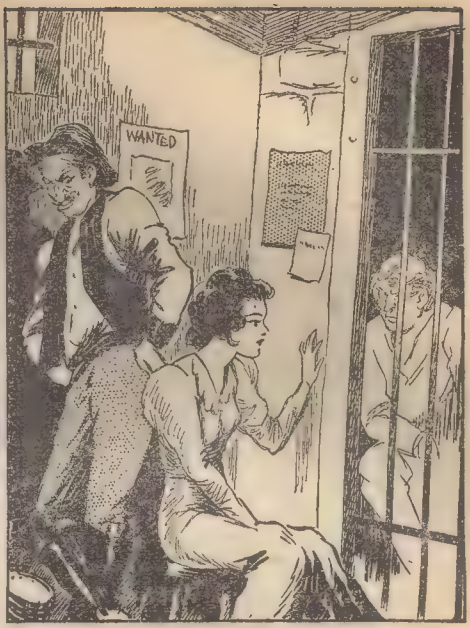


Mark, full of ambition and desire for a new life, hits the open spaces and travels in hope of good fortune and happiness. He claims a sizable strip of land in the Rocky Mountains, land which is later to become one of the richest ranches in the great West.



In 1880 Colby's prison term is drawing to its close. He is visited by his daughter Ellen. Jim Daggs, recently released from prison and a pal of Colby's, has located Hayden's ranch and is outfitting a wagon train—Colby and Daggs are on Hayden's trail!

The scene shifts to the Great West—where Colby and Daggs have arrived intent on evil. Daggs recommends a quick killing of Hayden and sudden riches for them both—but Colby prefers slowly to bleed Hayden of his extensive possessions. The two conspirators start rustling Hayden's cattle.

Daggs falls in love with Ellen Colby, who accompanied her father to the West. He dreams fondly of possessing Hayden's ranch—and having her for his bride. She is repeatedly annoyed by his advances, and threatens him to no avail. His greedy eyes glisten as he forces his attentions upon her.

[*Turn page*]

Caught in the act of stealing cattle, one of Colby's men is killed in a battle with one of Hayden's men. The latter is wounded, and returns to tell the story of his encounter. Mark Hayden is gloomy over the news—realizing that grim troubles have begun that may well result in ultimate disaster.

While Mark Hayden sits bowed in gloomy thoughts, a stranger enters the town on his first visit to the Golden West. As he rides his horse, something in the valley below him attracts his attention. "What's this!" he exclaims, and prepares to investigate.

Ellen, in swimming, is being molested by Daggs, whose greedy eyes are fixed upon her as he taunts her mercilessly. The stranger readily understands the situation—and determines to give his assistance to the girl.

With hard fists driven by muscles of steel, the stranger plunges in and makes short work of Daggs. Thoroughly beaten, cowed, Daggs crawls away vowing vengeance and cursing bitterly.

The stranger and the girl look into each other's eyes. She is attracted by his politeness, his frank appearance and manliness. He is drawn by her youthful beauty. There, on the open range, romance is born. "What is your name?" asks the stranger.

The shocking answer makes him gasp in amazement. "I'm Lynn Hayden!" he exclaims, and turns away. Both realize that love between them is an impossibility—for since childhood they are sworn enemies, and the feud is still on!

Now Daggs is actuated by a desire to revenge himself on Lynn Hayden. He is also impatient to secure Mark Hayden's ranch. He persuades Colby to help him set a trap.

While most of the hands are away, the Colby gang stages a surprise attack on the Hayden ranch. Mark and his younger children are killed. Lynn is now the last of the Haydens!

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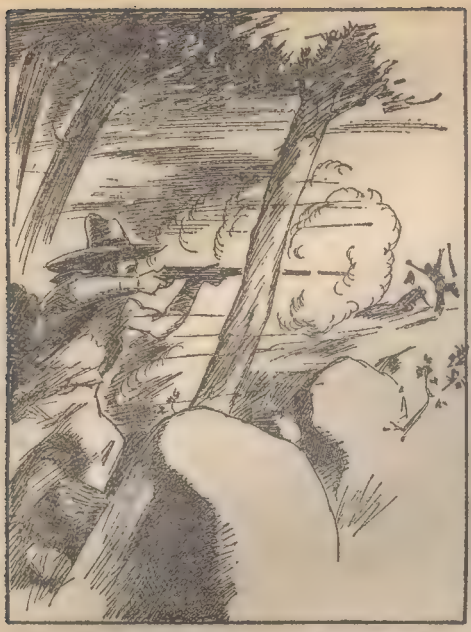
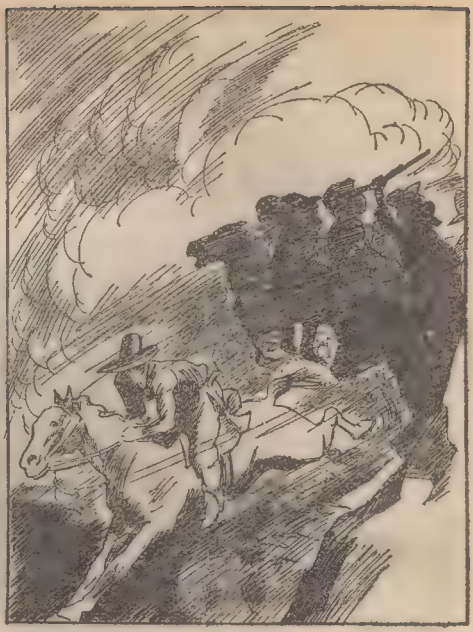


Lynn gets wind of the attack, hurries to the scene. A sharpshooter, he downs most of the murderous gang—but Daggs and Colby escape. Lynn is determined to capture them and make them pay for their villainy.



Lynn leads a posse, out to get Daggs and Colby and to recover stolen cattle and horses which have been hidden in a ravine. Blindly, the posse rides into the trap set by the cunning fiends!

BOOM! A sharp explosion rocks the hills. The posse is annihilated! The powder blast in the canyon spells sudden death and destruction and the tragedy echoes over the surrounding countryside.

Daggs, realizing that Colby is the only person in the way of his complete possession of the Hayden ranch and marriage to Ellen, murders his partner immediately after the explosion. A hidden man observes the crime.

In the Next Issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES:

For Lynn has escaped with his life—the only survivor of the trap. He staggers to the nearest cabin—Ellen's. Gasping, he tells Ellen what has happened. They see Daggs approaching.

Daggs enters, and a fierce battle ensues. Though wounded, Lynn is more than equal to the combat. Daggs meets his Waterloo —and the last man of the Colby crowd is vanquished.

"I love you," Lynn exclaims. "Ever since that first day when you were—" Ellen's eyes shine brightly as she listens to his proposal. The lovers agree that there is no longer any reason for enmity between them.

Together they look forward to joyous years —these two, who have found a love that transcends all hatred. Ellen and Lynn— Hayden, standing at the threshold of a glorious future.

Another Exciting Pictorial Novelization

Not One Honest

Larry Wentworth Finds Some Tough Hombres —And Romance—at Soda Springs

A Complete Novelette

By
GEORGE METCALF JOHNSON

Author of "Spyglass Range," "Trouble Ranch," etc.

With Mildred as guide the three rode forth.

I

Clams From Buffalo Creek

LARRY WENTWORTH—bronzed cowpoke, whose thin, capable lips offset the boyishness that twinkled in his eyes—lounged easily in the saddle. From the valley bluffs he watched an old man who was industriously grubbing at the river bottom.

"Digging mud clams," Larry chuckled.

The old fellow presently waded ashore, where he began opening mussels, slowly and methodically. Each was carefully scrutinized; the flesh dumped in a rusty pail.

"The old turkey's plumb crazy, or I am," Larry opined. "Guess I'll amble down and get acquainted."

His arrival was greeted by a resentful scowl.

"Howdy, Old Timer," Larry drawled. "How come you're panning the crick for mud clams?"

"Kinda nosey, ain't you, cowboy?" was the sullen reply. "Ef it's any business o' yourn, I'm getting bait fer my catfish traps.'"

Thereupon he abruptly departed, carrying off the unopened mussels. Thoughtfully Larry watched him go.

"Trying to hide something. And what was he looking for in them clams besides meat? I'm so dawgoned burned up with curiosity that I aim to do a little mussel digging myself.'"

Larry at once got busy. Mussels proved abundant, and before long he had tossed several dozen out on

Man

the river bank. Then he opened the shellfish as the old man had done, poking at the white, pulpy meat.

At last a single mussel remained, largest of the collection. The shell was twisted to a grotesque caricature of its fellows. Larry's knife forced it open. Then his jaws parted in a grunt of astonishment. Embedded in the pulp could be seen a round, pinkish lump. Sunlight played on it with a smooth, lustrous sheen.

"A pearl!" he gulped. "A pearl in a mud clam! That's sure a new one to me. And jumping Judas Priest, ain't she a beaut!"

Larry possessed no knowledge of precious stones, but he knew that the one in his hand was of tremendous value. It was as big as a large pea, no trace of a flaw marring the satin surface. After duly admiring the treasure, Larry tucked it away in an empty tobacco sack. Where one pearl grew, there might be others.

But an hour's intensive search brought no reward.

"Might as well knock off and head for this town they call Soda Springs," he decided. "Gosh, I'm hungry!"

He rode away, thinking of that pink, opalescent sphere in his pocket, speculating on its value. A rattler coiled by the dusty trail buzzed viciously as he passed. Larry shot off its head, holstering his gun without replacing the empty shell. At about sundown he reached town.

After satisfying his hunger, Larry set forth to see the sights. Soda Springs was not a prepossessing place. He recalled that conversation with a drummer, far to the north.

"For a wild town, take Soda Springs. I bet there's not one honest man in the whole place. Hombres in that burg are so tough they use crushed ore from the mine dumps for toothpaste, and drink nitric acid over the bar. Stay clear of Soda Springs. Find yourself in a jam before you'd been twenty-four hours there."

That was a challenge not to be ignored. Larry had promptly headed for Soda Springs, his mind full of anticipation and a money belt around his waist full of the United States Mint's choicest product.

The words *not one honest man* returned to him now. The faces he saw were marked by a common stamp of evil. Narrow-lidded eyes glared forth on the world with a cold ferocity. The riff-raff from a dozen ranges seemed assembled here.

SUDDENLY, down a side street at his left, a gun flashed in the darkness. Larry heard the thud of a bullet striking flesh. Hasty footsteps. Then silence. Cautiously he investigated, stumbling over a body.

Doors were flung open here and there. Someone brought a lantern. Its gleam disclosed the old chap Larry had met that afternoon on Buffalo Creek.

"Catfish Charlie!" a man grunted. "I wonder who salivated them?"

The washed-out eyes opened, to stare feverishly about the callous circle of bystanders. Then a claw-like hand pointed at Larry.

"There's the guy done it. He took a pearl I found this afternoon. Spying on me, he was."

Instantly, before Larry was awake to the sinister danger of this accusation, strong men had him by either arm.

"Hold everything! Here's the sheriff. Here comes Smoke Martin."

A BURLY figure shouldered his way into the lantern light.

"What goes on?" he demanded. Voluble explanations followed.

"Here's his gun, Smoke!" And Larry's weapon was passed over.

Martin examined it briefly. "One shell recently fired. He's the jasper that got Catfish all right. Fan him, Tom."

The tobacco sack and rose-pink pearl were exhumed.

"Thet's it!" Charlie gasped from the ground. "Thet's my pearl! I put her in a tobaccer bag. Gimme!" Feebly he extended an eager paw.

"No hurry, Catfish," the sheriff rejoined. "I'm holding your property as evidence." Then to several of the men present, "Take Charlie over to Mike's. See how bad he's shot. I'll lock this hombre in the hoosegow. Looks like we'll have a hanging."

The sheriff's office was in a front room of the local jail, a substantial, two-story structure built of stone. A deputy was there, tipped back in a chair, boot heels elevated to the spur-scarred desk.

"This jasper"—Martin prodded Larry with a gun—"just shot and robbed old Catfish Charlie. Charlie found a fresh-water pearl as big as a wild cherry in a mussel. Claims the guy saw him. Anyway, we got

the hombre dead to rights. His gun had just been fired and he had Charlie's pearl in his pocket. See what else you can find, Mex. Dig deep."

THE previous searching had been sketchy. Now Mex Graves, the deputy, made a more thorough job of it. He produced Larry's money belt.

"Count that cash," Larry said quietly. "And give me a receipt."

"Haw, haw!" Martin jeered. "Hear the hombre rave, Mex. Put him in Number 7. I'll take charge of his valuables."

Graves herded his captive upstairs and into an empty cell. The steel door clanged shut. He rejoined Sheriff Martin in the office just as a man bustled importantly through the front door.

"Stopped in to tell you, Smoke," said he, "that Catfish checked out. He was plumb defunct when we got him to Mike's."

After the news-bringer had gone on, Mex's eyes met those of the sheriff significantly.

"How 'bout splitting that poke with me now?" he suggested.

"Seems like we ought to wait till the hanging's over with, hadn't we?" Martin said virtuously. "To make things regular and in order.

"Okay, Smoke." Graves in turn went his way, leaving Martin alone. From his vest pocket Smoke took two tiny cloth sacks. Each contained a rose-pink pearl, closely matched in size and color.

"What I'd call a good night's work. Catfish is dead and the broncho forker's crowding close on his trail to the golden gates. Me—I'm sitting pretty."

Mex, and a breed carrying a tray of food, visited Larry at about eight o'clock the next morning. The deputy held his gun ready as he unlocked the door. Gleefully he mentioned the demise of Catfish Charlie. "We got a rope waiting for you, fella. Kiss yourself goodby."

Larry had to admit that his chances looked bad. Circumstantial evidence was all against him. But to his jailer he admitted nothing.

Graves brought more news the second day.

"Everybody in town's been digging mud clams," said he. "Looking for another pearl like the one you lifted off Catfish. And not a pearl. Looks like Charlie got the only one in Buffalo Crick. We aim to try you next Monday morning and hang you in the afternoon. Speed is our middle name in Soda Springs."

LARRY'S only visitors were Mex and the breed who brought his meals. The empty tray stayed in his cell until next meal time. Thus the slow, dreary hours dragged.

His fourth dinner at the town's expense included a dried apple turnover. When Larry's teeth bit into this they encountered something hard. It proved to be a small packet of hack-saw blades wrapped in waxed paper. With them a penciled message:

> *Cut the bars and go out the window. Tonight. By twelve, if possible. I'll be waiting for you from midnight on. Destroy this.* A FRIEND.

That night Larry began sawing at the tough steel bars. The first was cut in an hour. Two more out would leave sufficient room for him to slip through. By a quarter of twelve the last bar was severed. Larry thrust his shoulders into the opening, peering down. It was pitchy dark. He could see nothing —hear nothing. The distance to the

ground was between fifteen and twenty feet. Too far for a drop.

He ripped a blanket into three strips, knotting them together. One end was tied to an uncut bar of the window. Then he eased himself, feet first, out of the window. A moment later his boot heels scraped dirt. From the darkness a figure appeared.

"Don't talk," in a whisper. "Follow me."

His guide led Larry away from the jail, following a roundabout course through the night.

"I've got two horses just ahead here," came the low voice of Larry's still unidentified friend.

They reached the horses, mounted and rode away. Slowly at first, a sedate jog until they cleared the outskirts of the town.

"Come on now, cowboy. Let's go!"

They plunged on at a furious gallop, while Larry grappled with the mystery of his rescue. Who had done it? And why? The horses splashed into a shallow ford over a stream, stopping to drink. Larry rolled a cigarette. He lit it, taking a hasty glance at his companion's face as the match flared. Larry's cigarette, forgotten, escaped his lips.

"Good Lord! You—you're a girl!"

II

At the Boxed Triangle

THE demoralized cowpoke's head was whirling with the shock of this wholly unexpected discovery. A girl! And mighty pretty at that, as he had seen from that one hasty glance.

"Suppose I am?" Larry could imagine that she gave her head a demure little toss. "Have you any objections?"

"Not me, ma'am! And I was a terrible sap at figuring a voice as pleasant sounding as yours could belong to any range rider. No objections a-tall. But I was knocked all of a twitter, sort of. I'm certainly obliged to you. What's the answer? You've got me guessing."

THE horses splashed on across the creek.

"I knew you were innocent of that murder. You see, I happened to be up on the bluff the day you were opening mussels. I saw you find something, and put it away in a tobacco bag. When I learned later of the jam you'd got into, I couldn't see any hope except through escape from jail. Soda Springs is an awful town!" She uttered the words with a savage tenseness. "How I hate that place and its people! I don't believe there's one honest man in it!"

"You're the second person I've heard express that opinion," Larry said. "Makes it pretty near unanimous."

"Who was the other?"

"A hardware drummer I met in Tom Sweeney's store at Rapid City, up in the Black Hills. He warned me I'd find trouble. What's your name, ma'am, if I might ask? And where we going?"

"I'm Mildred Newton. We're headed for my ranch, the Boxed Triangle. That is, it used to be a ranch. Now it's not much better than a cluster of weather-stained buildings. Things haven't gone so well since—since my brother Fred—went away."

"Your brother's dead, Miss Newton?"

"No," she said simply. "He's in prison."

"Oh," Larry gulped, abashed. "I'm mighty sorry, ma'am."

"Fred never had a chance!" Her voice was vibrant with bitterness.

"Someone held up a mine pay roll. Fred was home with me at the time, but they framed him with planted evidence. My testimony at the trial didn't count for a cent.

ART WILLARD, who handled the prosecution, proved to the jury's satisfaction that I was lying to save Fred. It was the thought of my brother's trouble that made me want to help you. Getting out of the Soda Springs jail is only the first step. I think you ought to be as far away as possible before daylight. Then hide over until tomorrow night."

"Just a moment, Miss Newton! How'd you work the saw blades into my dinner?"

"Through the Mexican who carried food to you. He hates Sheriff Martin. And one time I did him a little favor."

"That a regular line with you? Doing folks favors, I mean."

She did not answer this, spurring her horse to a faster pace. "We ought to hurry. I'll give you some food and a fresh cayuse when we get to the Boxed Triangle. Then you must be on your way."

"I don't aim to rush off, Miss Newton," Larry said quietly.

"But you must! You can't risk staying in this country!"

"I been thinking it over," Larry went on, above the pound of their horses' feet. "Martin may get wise to how I broke out of his jail. He'll likely figure that the saw blades came in with my food. I wouldn't want you to be blamed for it. What I expect to do is stick around until I see how the wind blows. How far is your ranch from town?"

"About fifteen miles. But please don't be silly. You won't make it any easier for me by staying."

"We'll argue that later, Miss Newton. Now while we ride along suppose you tell me more about affairs over to Soda Springs?"

It was a sordid story. Soda Springs was a prosperous town, lying on the border of cattle range and mining country. The political boss was one Saunders Randolph, formerly professional gambler of the gold camps. Randolph controlled a powerful machine that ran the town.

He did not hold civic office himself, but all officials, from the mayor down, obeyed his orders. Vice, gambling and graft of all kinds poured wealth into his lap.

THEY reached the ranch at about four o'clock. Mildred insisted again that Larry leave without delay. This he refused to do.

"Anybody staying here with you, Miss Newton?"

"An old Mexican couple. I had to let our riders go after Fred was sentenced. And his defense cost a lot of money. We'd been having trouble for some time, because Fred refused to pay toll to the organization."

Larry unsaddled the two horses, turning them into the corral.

"Won't you please go?" she begged.

"I won't stay at the house," Larry said. "But I'm not leaving the region. Not yet, Miss Newton."

"I think you're awfully stubborn, Mr. Wentworth."

"Call me Larry, you might. Sounds like we were really acquainted."

"Oh, dear! You're the limit! Absolutely! Come along, then. I just can't have you out of my sight, waiting for Martin or his men to pick you up. Playing guardian to stray cowpokes is a fearful responsibility."

"Ain't that the truth?" Larry grinned.

He followed her into the house, where she lit a lamp. Larry was gratified to find his first impressions of Mildred Newton confirmed. But about her features could be discerned a lurking sadness, especially when they were in repose. Here was a girl, he thought, made for smiles and laughter. She could smile. He had not yet heard her laugh.

Mildred sat at the dining room table, elbows on the cloth, firm little chin cradled in her palms. Soberly she watched him. Larry rolled a cigarette.

"Since you refuse to carry through the plans I made for you," said she, "what *do* you expect to do?"

"Haven't thought it out yet. I may drift on later, when I'm sure there'll be no flare-back your way from this business. Now about your brother. For how long was he sent up?"

"Three years," she told him dully. "He's served one year of his time."

FOR a while they talked. Larry learned more of the courageous fight Fred Newton had waged against overwhelming odds. A fight foredoomed to failure. The Boxed Triangle was potentially valuable because of water rights. It looked to Larry like a game of freeze-out. One thing he felt sure of. Mildred was holding back certain facts that no doubt had a bearing on the situation.

"Some hombre in the section is out to get her," he reasoned shrewdly. "Either a ranchman who plays in with the town gang, or a guy over to Soda Springs. Would it be this big shot, Randolph? Or perhaps Smoke Martin?" A blaze of fury surged through Larry's heart at the mere thought of the crooked officer. There was no occasion to warn Mildred against Martin.

"She knows he ain't a Sunday school superintendent," Larry mused, studying the play of lamp light on her face. Mildred's age he placed at not over twenty. He liked the free and easy air of good fellowship she showed toward him. And the frank, open way her eyes met his.

Mildred Newton was a thoroughbred. No question about that. Larry found himself envying the man who had her for a sister. Then, suddenly, with a tightening of heart muscles, he envied the man who some day would claim the right to a closer, dearer relationship.

WITH a feeling of guilt he realized how late it was—that Mildred was weary after all she had done for him.

"Past time for you to be asleep, Miss Newton," said he. "I'll find me a shake-down in the bunkhouse. Which building is it?"

"Second to the left of the corral, *Mister* Wentworth," she said teasingly.

"Thought you were going to call me Larry. Seems to me we're well enough acquainted for that by now."

"Fifty-fifty?"

"You mean that?" he demanded.

"Of course. Why not?"

"Calling you Mildred is a privilege I value a lot. Good-night!"

"Wait, Larry! I forgot to give you a gun." From a closet she took a cartridge-studded belt, handing it to him. "This was my brother's."

"I'll accept it as a temporary loan," Larry said, buckling the belt about his waist. There was a vast comfort in again feeling the drag of iron on his thigh. "Can I go out through the rear of the house?"

"Yes. Straight back. Perhaps I'd better show you the way."

"That isn't necessary, thanks," Larry rejoined. "I'll make out okay.

Good-night, Mildred. I'll see you in the morning."

But as Larry was on the point of leaving the ranchhouse, an alarm bell tinkled its shrill warning in his brain. A warning to go slow. Cautiously he peered forth. In the dusk of fading night a dim figure stirred. Then another, twenty paces farther along. It was all too obvious that a net of men had been flung silently about the place.

III

A Visit From Sheriff Martin

"THIS ain't so hot," Larry thought grimly. "I've been asleep at the switch, sort of."

It came as a cruel blow to learn that Martin had discovered so promptly his escape from the Soda Springs jail. And even as a crueler blow that suspicion had been directed at once toward Mildred Newton. In Larry's mind was born an unpleasant belief that Smoke might have known what was stirring all the time; that he had deliberately let the affair go on to its conclusion for purposes best known to himself.

At the front of the house sounded a knocking. Larry heard Mildred's steps as she responded. "Bet she's scared stiff now, poor kid!" was his thought.

Returning steps proved that Mildred had admitted the intruder. Larry caught the rumble of a heavy voice. Smoke Martin's voice.

"Damned polecat!" he mused wrathfully.

With elaborate caution he slipped back toward the dining room where, from the sounds, Mildred had conducted the sheriff. A short hallway separated it from the kitchen. Just beyond the half-open door Larry paused.

"You made a mistake, Mildred," Martin was saying benevolently, "helping that murdering bronchoforker out of jail."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she answered with a flash of spirit.

"Sure you do. I knew what your play was all the time, and I had it coppered before you started. I was wise to the hack-saw blades. So they's no need of lying. Where'd that hombre go?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Mildred said. Apparently she realized that further denial was fruitless. "I gave him food and a horse and advised him to hit the trail hard."

"He ain't on the place here, eh?"

"NO!" was the girl's defiant answer. "Do you take me for a fool, Smoke? He's miles away by now."

"H-m! Kinda bad for you, then, Mildred. You're liable to the law yourself. You've connived at the escape of a man the coroner ordered held for murder. We got a clear case against him. Now you're an accessory after the fact."

"If Larry Wentworth had been guilty I would never have lifted a finger to save him. But he was innocent—just as my brother Fred was innocent. I knew too well what chance an innocent man has in Soda Springs."

"Mebby you *think* Wentworth ain't guilty. I know better. And your acting thisaway puts me in an embarrassing position. I gotta arrest you, Mildred, which is the last thing I want to do. You'll be tried and convicted sure as shooting. You'll go to prison for conniving at a crime."

"That," she said coldly, "is just the sort of justice I should expect from Soda Springs. The guilty always go free there; only the innocent are punished."

Smoke Martin let this pass.

"I hate to do it, Mildred. I reckon I'll never forgive myself. But duty is duty. Still and all—I reckon I could put the soft pedal on this business if you'd be reasonable. You know I've been loving you for a spell of moons. Now if we was to get married, Mildred—"

SO MARTIN'S the guy!" Larry muttered savagely to himself. His borrowed gun was drawn, but Larry did not yet interfere. How far would Martin go?

Mildred laughed contemptuously. "As an alternative to marrying you, Smoke, prison life would seem like a vision of paradise."

"You're turning me down, eh?" Martin grumbled.

"So it would seem," she mocked him. "And without thanks for a doubtful honor. Did you really rate me as cheap as all that, Smoke?"

Martin glowered resentfully at her.

"You're talking pretty brash, Mildred. For a girl I've got in my fist, where I can clamp the pressure on. Damn it, you're not going to throw me down. You're going to take me—and like it! Now's as good a time to start as any."

Martin's arm darted out like the stroke of a rattler to seize Mildred's wrist. Her instinctive backward jerk was a second too late. With a bestial grunt of triumph he drew her toward him.

"God, but you're pretty!" he gloated.

Behind him a step, so soft that Martin did not hear. But he did feel the punch of a gun muzzle in his ribs.

"One false step, hombre," was Larry's advice, "and you'll be telling the grim reaper howdy. Blat a warning to them fellas outside—and the old boy swings his scythe!" Deftly he secured the sheriff's gun.

"Nice work, Larry!" Mildred applauded. Her eyes were shining.

"Now we got the cuss what we going to do with him?" was Larry's practical question.

"I know. Make him tell the men outside that he led them on a wild goose chase; that they're to go back to town. He himself will stay on here at the Boxed Triangle." Larry opened his mouth to object. "Oh, I know what they'll say and what they'll think. But it doesn't matter, Larry. We must get rid of those men."

"Okay," he agreed reluctantly. It might work, and Larry had no plan of his own worth mentioning. He urged Martin at the point of his gun toward the front door.

"Sing your little song, Sheriff," he directed, "and take care they ain't any sour notes. I'll have my hogleg bent on your carcass, and if one guy in that gang gets wise, you won't live to see the fireworks. Now, hop to it!" Larry opened the door, standing where he could not be seen by those without.

A LOW whistle from Martin brought several of the posse.

"Looks like we're on the wrong trail," he said. "Wentworth ain't here and ain't been here. Miss Newton's proved she didn't help him get away. Round up the boys and head back to town."

"What you doing, Smoke?"

Martin coughed apologetically as Larry's gun bored into the small of his back.

"Why—er—I calc'late to spend the evening here. You know how it is, boys. I'll be seeing you."

A chorus of guffaws and jeers intermingled.

"Pretty soft for you, Smoke. And we get a kick in the pants. Okay! Give the lady our regards."

Larry shut and locked the door. Then conducted his prisoner back to the dining room. Mildred was looking out through a tear in the drawn shade.

"They're actually going, Larry!" she exulted. "And with them goes my reputation. Life is like that." Her eyes were dancing with glee at the success of their ruse.

"Got any rope handy?" Larry asked.

MILES of it." She produced a supply, with which the captive was trussed.

"Mebby you think you got me now, hombre," said Martin darkly. "But they's going to be a big score to settle. When I get through with you they won't be even a grease spot left."

"Yeah?" grunted Larry skeptically. "I'll bear that in mind, fella. Now them valuables you took off me. I wonder—"

Larry's fingers began exploring various portions of the sheriff's anatomy. From a vest pocket he plucked forth a familiar tobacco sack; then another. For a split second Larry's brain missed their significance; but only for a split second.

"Look, Mildred!" He showed her a pair of rose-pink pearls.

"Oh, Larry! They're exquisite! But two of them. Did—did he—"

"Yep," said Larry. "He did. Smoke Martin's the skunk that salivated poor old Catfish Charlie. And I never even had a glimmer of suspicion."

"But how did he know that you had a pearl identical with the one Charlie found?"

"He didn't. Not till he saw it when they accused me of the killing. Smoke figured that was a break for him, and he aimed to take full advantage of the same."

"If you think you can hang that job on me," Martin snarled, "go on and try."

"He's right," Mildred agreed. "I know enough of Soda Springs to second the motion. That is, while things are run there as they are now. We've got something, Larry. But using it is a problem."

"We'll let the deal ride for a spell. Meanwhile I didn't finish with Smoke."

Larry continued his activities. Around Martin's waist, under a flannel shirt, Larry found his own money belt.

"Business is sure picking up," he told the girl. "Now you better go to bed. Smoke and I'll tackle the bunkhouse."

"Be careful, won't you, Larry?"

"Nothing else but. I'm so proud of this slippery gent's society that hell and high water couldn't pry us apart."

IV

Three Days

WE GOT to get Smoke Martin away from the ranch," Larry opined, finishing his coffee. He and Mildred were having breakfast, cooked by old Lucia, who served as housekeeper. Both she and her husband, José, were absolutely trustworthy.

"Why, Larry?"

"When he don't show up at Soda Springs some party or parties are liable to ride out here to see what's happened to him. I feel nervous having him tied up in the bunkhouse, waiting to be found. Our best bet is to hang on to Smoke as a hostage. We know he's guilty of murder. As long as we keep possession of him personally, we can use him as an ace in the hole, sort of. When the pot gets right we'll flash our hole card."

"That," Mildred said," sounds like a splendid idea. Your scheme is to hide him somewhere away from the Boxed Triangle?"

"Yeah. You got any suitable location in mind?"

"There's an old prospector's shack back in the hills, six or eight miles from here. The country is so wild that hardly any one ever goes near it."

"Made to order," Larry approved.

They decided to postpone moving their prisoner until night, thus avoiding risk of encountering riders on the range.

Much to his relief the day passed quietly. As dusk settled down over the range, Martin, his hands still bound, was placed on a horse. With Mildred as guide the cavalcade set forth. A rope linked Larry's saddle horn to the bridle of the mount Smoke rode. Thus the captive could not make a sudden dash for liberty.

Martin was threatening and abusive, promising the direst of fates for both Larry and Mildred. When his language became rather sultry Larry uttered a few terse threats on his own account, and Martin prudently subsided.

THE plan went through like clockwork. Martin was established in the ramshackle cabin, hog-tied so effectively that unaided he could not possibly escape. Larry returned with Mildred to the Boxed Triangle. It seemed preferable to leave Martin unguarded than subject her to the danger of having to face alone an encounter with questionable characters from Soda Springs.

"But it will be fatal for you—if you're found at the ranch," she protested. "I—I can take care of myself."

"Yeah? The way you did when Smoke started his rough stuff last night? Listen, Mildred. You're going to need a bodyguard for a spell, and I've given myself the honor. I'll stay in the background unless needed."

"All right, Larry," she said softly. "But I—I'll be worried about you."

A warm glow suffused Larry's breast.

LARRY slept again in the bunkhouse, his gun handy, and ears attuned to catch the faintest sound of alarm. Nothing happened. Nor did the second day prove any more eventful than the preceding. Larry made a trip to the cabin, bearing food for their prisoner.

He insisted that Mildred accompany him, since he dreaded having her out of his sight. Both were puzzled at the unexpected immunity they enjoyed. It seemed incredible that Sheriff Martin could be absent so long from his baliwick, and no investigation started.

"What do you make of it, Larry?" Mildred asked.

"Too much for me. I was positive we'd hear from town 'fore now. It's sure a mystery."

And the mystery deepened with the coming of another day.

"I'm going to town," Larry abruptly announced.

"Please don't! You're sure to be arrested, and I could never get you out of jail again."

"I won't hit town till after dark. Mighty few people there know me, and I'll play safe. But something's happened. I've got to learn what it is."

"Then let me go in your place. That will be safer."

"Not a chance," Larry grinned reprovingly. "You stay with Lucia and her man. I hate to desert you, but I reckon if folks were coming out from Soda Springs we'd seen 'em by now. Okay?"

"No!" said Mildred. "It's not

okay at all, Larry. I know you'll be running into more trouble."

"I'm not so sure. But I can't stick around any longer twiddling my thumbs and waiting. Only reason I'd stay here is on your account. If you're afraid for yourself—"

"You know that's not it."

"Then she's settled. And I'll be back pronto."

Larry saddled a horse and was on his way.

It was then early in the afternoon, but Larry would take a roundabout route to town, since he planned to visit the old cabin. Smoke Martin had to be fed and watered.

Thus the puncher did not reach Soda Springs until dark. He anchored his horse at the rail of an empty store on a side street, and then ventured cautiously into the heart of the metropolis. At once Larry became impressed with a subtle change. It was reflected on the faces of men he saw; in the very atmosphere of the place. Events of momentous importance must have occurred since his previous visit.

Larry strolled slowly on, eyes and ears alert for a solution to the mystery. No man seemed to recognize him; no one gave him more than a careless glance. Suddenly he stopped in his tracks, staring. Opposite across the street, was an imposing saloon and gambling house. It had been running full blast the night Larry was in Soda Springs. Now it was dark. The name could be read by light from a neighboring building.

THE SILVER STAR
S. RANDOLPH - - - PROP.

Randolph—the big noise in Soda Springs! His resort closed, while others did a thriving business!

A broad-shouldered man came into view at this instant, pausing to chat with acquaintances. A silver badge pinned to his vest bore the word "Sheriff." A successor to Martin! For an instant Larry was on the point of accosting the new officer. Yet, as a jail-breaker at large, his own standing in Soda Springs was dubious. Better not go direct to headquarters for information. Larry moved on. A few minutes later he had scraped up acquaintance with a solitary cowpoke.

"DO you happen to know how I could locate Smoke Martin?" Larry inquired after a decent interval. The other gave him a sharp, questioning glance.

"What you doing, fella? Kidding me?"

"Why, no. I just wanted to get in touch with Smoke."

"Friend of his?" The speaker's eyes had narrowed; his former friendly look replaced with one of suspicious interest. This gave Larry a clue.

"Anything else but. Fact is, I'm after Smoke, 'count of a bad turn he did me once."

"You a stranger in town?"

"Yeah. I just now blew in."

Some of the suspicion dropped away. "That accounts for it, I reckon. You likely ain't heard the news. If I knew where Smoke was I'd go after him myself."

"Why?"

"Come along down the street. I'll give you an eyeful."

He steered Larry to the next corner. Stuck on the window of a store was a printed notice:

$1000 REWARD $1000
For the capture of Job Martin, formerly Sheriff of Soda Springs.

With bulging eyes Larry ran through the details of this placard.

It was sponsored by the Citizens' Law and Order Committee.

"Huh!" he grunted. "So they's been a clean-up, eh?"

"You said it!"

"Musta been some honest men in this burg after all," Larry added.

"Guess they wa'n't all crooks. But the shake-up started from outside. The Governor's had agents working here for a spell on the q. t. They collected evidence against Randolph and his crowd.

"Then, all of a sudden, they sprung the trap. Whango! Just like that! And the fireworks was over 'bout the same time they started. Most all the gang but Martin are in the hoosegow. Nobody seems to understand how he got away. But plenty of guys will be giving you competition. One thousand bucks ain't to be sneezed at."

Exultantly Larry headed back to where his cayuse was anchored.

"Boy, am I in luck!" he gloated. "That murder charge don't need to bother me any more. And Smoke Martin is worth a thousand dollars. All I gotta do is bring him into town and collect."

HE recovered his horse and set out for the Boxed Triangle.

Lights were gleaming from the ranchhouse as he at length drew near. Mildred would be sitting up, waiting his return. Larry did not stop to unsaddle. The side door was unlocked, and he entered. A lamp burned on the dining room table. No sign of Mildred.

"Queer!" he muttered. "It ain't likely she's gone to bed."

Larry moved on to the front of the house, boot heels scraping noisily on the floor. The living room was also lighted; empty of life as well. Disagreeable little prickles played up and down Larry's spine. Something was wrong here. Abruptly the dining room light at his back went out. A voice from the darkness—cold—threatening—

"Up with 'em, hombre!"

V

SHOW-DOWN

LARRY mouthed an imprecation at his own carelessness. To draw his gun and take a snap shot at the sound of his antagonist's voice would be suicidal.

"Okay!" he growled. Slowly his arms went up. Footsteps approached out of the darkness.

"Turn around. Your back to me!" Larry obeyed, and felt his gun pulled from the holster. "Now forward towards the lamp! Whoa! Hold it! I want a better look at you."

Larry himself was vastly curious as to the identity of the man who appeared so disastrously. Was it one of Martin's gang? He cringed at the mere possibility. If so, what had happened to Mildred?

With mutual curiosity the two surveyed each other. Larry saw a chap younger than himself by perhaps a year—clean-cut; his features were pleasant enough, though they bore a latent grimness of expression. His face was white with a pallor unnatural to one who lived on the range. Suddenly Larry had the answer.

"Say," he grunted, "isn't your name Fred Newton?"

"Well, what of it? Who the hell are you? And what are you doing in this house?" In a quick flood of words Larry explained. Newton was at first distrustful. But his distrust soon vanished.

"But where's Mildred?"

"That's what we've got to find out," Larry said. "I'm worried about her. How long you been here?"

"Not long. They wasn't a soul on

the place when I came—not even Lucia or José."

"All three were here when I left for town. Two o'clock or thereabouts that was. I don't like this. Mildred wouldn't go away of her own accord." Anxiously his eyes questioned Fred.

"First thing to do is check up on Smoke. Find if he's still in the shack where you and Mildred left him."

"Yeah," Larry assented. "The sooner the quicker. But I'm afraid he won't be there."

Newton gave more information about himself as they rode swiftly towards the cabin. He had won the friendship of the prison warden, who had in turn interested the Governor of the State. In due course the pardon followed.

"And I bet that's what made the Governor start his clean-up at Soda Springs," Larry exclaimed. This was news to Fred; he had not been through the town on the way home.

"I wanted to steer clear of that dump for a while," he said. "Until I made up my mind just what to do about something I learned up at the big stone house. A jasper there had been double-crossed by Randolph and his crowd. He told me who held up the paymaster. That job I did time for. It was Smoke himself."

AN HOUR'S hard riding brought them to the abandoned shack. And Larry's worst fears received cruel confirmation. The place was empty—his prisoner gone.

"What's that?" Fred exclaimed. He clutched at a piece of paper lying under a section of rope. Together, by the uncertain flicker of matches, they read a hasty, sinister scrawl from Smoke Martin.

Mildred would be returned, safe and unharmed, for a price—the two rose-pink pearls and the fifteen hundred dollars in Larry's money belt. He must appear alone and on foot—this was underscored—at a designated spot at nine the following morning to pay the ransom. Any attempt to discover Mildred's whereabouts, or to enlist aid, would mean her immediate death.

"Good God," Fred muttered. "That skunk means business! What can we do, Larry?"

"Just what Smoke says. Pay him the plunder."

"Yeah. And be double-crossed. He'll not let Mildred go."

"I don't expect he plans to," Larry agreed. "What he counts on is killing two birds with one bullet. I'm one of the birds. There are reasons why he might rest easier if I was buzzard fodder."

HOW'S this? You go to meet Smoke as he says. I'll sneak along behind and cover you with a rifle."

"No good, Fred. I think I've got the play doped correct. Right now Smoke and whoever's working with him don't know you're sitting in. Our best bet is to keep 'em ignorant. See? Assuming I'm blotted out, you're left to take care of Mildred. Smoke will lead you to where she is. But until we know the hideout of these polecats, we're helpless. Get me?"

"Yeah, I get you, Larry," Newton said slowly. "I'm using you as bait to fish with. Which means you're on the short end. I don't like it. We're plumb certain ahead of time that Smoke won't play straight. Why not salivate him on the spot at the first signs of crookedness?"

"Because we've got to think of Mildred. Killing Smoke isn't going to get her free. He's not alone. Some of his pals got clear when the lid blew off at Soda Springs. Either they happened to find Martin at the shack here, or else went to the

Boxed Triangle and forced Mildred to tell where he was.

"They took Lucia and her man, too, so neither could squawk. Suppose I kill Smoke. Mildred is still in the hands of jaspers no better'n he is, and mebby worse. That's why I don't aim to shoot."

"You're willing to give Smoke a chance to kill you—just so I can trail him to where she is?"

"Why not? Mildred's in this mainly because she took my part. I've only known her for a few days, Fred, but I—I reckon I'm in love with that sister of yours. I been cherishing dreams lately, hoping they might come true some day."

Newton gripped Larry's hand in the dimness of the unlighted shack. "If you get a tough break," said he feelingly, "I'll collect double; once for Mildred and once for you."

"Okay. Now to plan ways and means. You know this country better than I do. Give me the once-over on this place where I'm supposed to meet Smoke."

LARRY was walking forward, slowly, toward a solitary figure that waited for him to approach. Already he had recognized Smoke Martin, outlawed sheriff of Soda Springs. The region was a badly eroded tableland which provided abundant cover.

Larry's eyes flickered to either side as he strode on. Was Smoke playing a lone hand? Or was his flank protected by a hidden gunman?

Yet, whether Smoke was alone or not, Larry had little expectation of leaving the place alive. He was ready to pay over to Martin the price demanded for Mildred's release, even knowing in advance that Smoke would not keep his share of the agreement. Her sole hope, as Larry saw it, lay in Fred, who lurked in the background.

Smoke remained silent until Larry was half a dozen paces away. Then he spoke.

"Hold it!" Larry stopped. "Got the stuff with you?"

"Yeah," said Larry easily. "I've got it." He took a step nearer. If he could get within striking distance there was a faint chance of capturing the fellow alive. Men could be made to talk. "Hold it, I said!" Smoke snarled harshly. Larry obeyed. No need to force the issue. "Where are those pearls?"

"Here—in the tobacco sacks." Larry displayed them. "And I'm wearing the money belt. Where's Miss Newton?"

"She's all right. When I'm paid off I'll let her go."

"Yeah? When you let her go I'll pay you off."

Martin's mouth was distorted by a snarl of rage. "I'm not here to argue with you, hombre!" He raised his voice a trifle. "Let him have it, Mex!"

Before Larry could grasp the full significance of those words, even before they left Martin's lips—a rifle cracked spitefully. Through Larry's brain flashed a whirl of impressions. They came and went in the time space measured by two ticks of a watch. Martin's plans had gone haywire. A startled jerk of his head betrayed that. The rifle shot came from an unexpected location.

IT was not Mex Graves who had fired; nor was Larry himself the target. Some unknown individual was taking a hand. Not Newton, for Fred had promised to keep out of sight, whatever happened.

Larry's eyes narrowed, boring into Smoke, whose right hand darted for the weapon sagging on his thigh. Instinctively Larry snapped his .45 from leather. He beat Martin's draw by that split second which

spells the margin between life and death. Larry could have killed Martin then. Yet he did not fire. Just in time he remembered his self-chosen rôle. Smoke Martin must not die. Then a woman's shrill scream, voicing the agony of dreadful fear. "Larry!" she cried. "Larry!" The words were blotted out by the roar of Smoke's gun.

A bullet flicked Larry's shoulder. He felt the sharp sting as it grazed the flesh.

His .45 spoke, so close on Martin's that the two reports blended together. Back of the smoke cloud he saw the other's face, convulsed with frustrated rage.

Martin tried to fire again. But his hand lacked strength to hold the heavy pistol, which slipped from his grasp. For a second or two he stood erect, fighting the weakness that suddenly assailed him. Then he collapsed limply.

Larry's gaze, grim—questioning—centered on his prostrate foe. But Smoke Martin was through. From the left Mildred came running. Behind her, puffing, Lucia. Then José, carrying a rifle. The mystery of that timely shot was solved.

"Oh, Larry," Mildred sobbed. "I was afraid Smoke would kill you."

The grimness melted from Larry's face; his eyes grew tender.

"I'm certainly glad he didn't. There're reasons why I want to live. Can you guess what they are?"

SHE nodded shyly, blushing. Her happy blush was an answer to an unspoken question that trembled on Larry's lips. But José and Lucia drew near, quite inopportunely. The former's swarthy face was glowing.

"I got a nice surprise for you, Mildred," Larry now said. "Somebody you'll be glad to see." And Fred Newton arrived, to make the reunion a complete success.

Explanations followed in due course, though Larry had already anticipated much of what took place. Smoke Martin and two men, one of them Graves, his former deputy, had come to the ranch the previous evening. They took Mildred and Lucia away with them, but José managed to escape observation, following to the outlaw camp under cover of night. Next morning, when Smoke and Mex departed to keep the rendezvous with Larry, José shot the guard, releasing Mildred and his wife.

MILDRED had overheard the details of Martin's plot. No time was to be lost, and the three at once hurried away, hoping to intercept Larry before he reached the meeting place. Fortunately a last-minute change of plan gave José a chance to shoot Mex as he drew a bead on Larry.

"You were a regular ball of fire, José," Larry informed the faithful fellow. "Two guys like you are worth an army." He turned to Newton. "Fred, would you be willing to let your sister marry a jail-bird?"

"Being a jail-bird in this community is a mark of distinction," Newton grinned. "We're a pair, Larry. There's no man I'd rather take into the family than you. What do *you* say, Sis? Could you and this roughneck hit it off without quarreling?"

"He's not a roughneck," Mildred declared spiritedly. "No more than you, Fred. I think you're both perfect."

Two quick steps took Larry to her side. His hands rested on her shoulders, his eyes gazing into hers.

"Will you have me, Mildred? For better or for worse?"

"For better, Larry," she whispered softly. "Not for worse."

TROUBLE *on the*

Tom Lindon Hears a Woman Scream and Keeps Close to a Ranch Where Strangers Aren't Popular

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A Complete Novelette

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Author of "The Whistling Waddy Rides On," "The Crawling Creature," etc.

TOM LINDON slid from the saddle with a jingling thud as his spurred boots hit the ground. He was running swiftly as he again heard the scream.

His gray Stetson bounced from his head and dropped to the ground, but he was not interested in the hat at the moment. As he ran the heavy Colt .45 in the open holster tied low on his left thigh rubbed gently against his worn trouser leg.

The bright sun gleamed on his lean strong face, the firm chin, and the clear blue eyes. The smooth dark hair was very thick.

He did not draw his gun as he clattered up the three wooden steps of the porch. He knew that a man dashing into a strange house with a gun in his hand was likely to be met by a reception of warm lead.

For the third time that distinctly feminine wail of pain and terror rang in his ears.

His shoulders caught the closed front door of the house and it swung open back so suddenly that he nearly lost his balance. He righted himself in an instant, the fingers of his left hand close to the butt of his gun as he halted and stood staring into the room beyond.

He found himself facing a tall, gray-bearded man who held a heavy whip in one hand, while with the other he started to reach for the gun in his holster.

Near him stood a slender, auburn-haired girl, a startled expression upon her lovely face as she gazed at the man who stood in the doorway.

"I wouldn't draw if I were you!" Lindon's voice was soft but com-

ROLLING R

Lindon rode hard and fast. He was close to the wagon now.

manding as he gazed into the elderly man's eyes. "It might not be healthy."

"Who are you?" demanded the gray-bearded man, his hand slowly moving away from his holster as he caught the icy warning in the expression of the lean faced man who had appeared so suddenly. "What the devil do you mean by bursting into my house this way?"

"I thought the lady might be in trouble," Lindon glanced for an instant at the girl, who had dropped limply into a chair and was now sobbing softly. "I heard her scream." He smiled coldly, his eyes again watching the elderly man. "So being right curious at times I thought I'd better see what it was all about."

"It was nothing," the bearded man smiled. "My niece and I were merely having a little argument."

Lindon looked again at the girl. She had stopped crying and was watching him, conscious of the strength of character in his bronzed young face.

"And you recckoned you might

need that whip you're holding to back you up?"

Lindon was conscious of a sudden unexpected thrill as his eyes had met those of the girl, and he glanced quickly at the bearded man as he spoke.

"OF course not," the tall man tossed the whip carelessly to the floor. "I just happened to have it in my hand." His tone became supercilious. "My dear man, I'm Colonel Mark Rawkin, the owner of this ranch. Surely you don't think I'd strike a woman?"

"I stopped thinking out loud a long time ago."

As he spoke Lindon deliberately moved forward so that he was facing the girl in the chair. Yet he was careful not to turn his back on Colonel Rawkin.

The girl raised her head and looked at him. Now, as he stood closer to her, he realized that her hazel eyes were very lovely, but there was a hint of fear in their depths.

Lindon found it suddenly vital that this girl should not be afraid.

"Maybe you'd better tell me what happened, Miss," he said gently. "You needn't be afraid of the truth."

"It—it was nothing," the girl spoke as though she were choosing her words carefully, her slender hands played with her handkerchief. "Uncle Mark is right, we were just quarreling, and something he said made me scream."

She seemed unable to face Lindon's gaze. She smiled nervously as she stood up, her head just on a line with Lindon's shoulder, the sunlight that streamed in through the windows bringing out the copper tints in the auburn hair. The green house dress that she wore was very becoming. "Silly of me, wasn't it?"

"I wouldn't say that." A wave of cold rage swept over Tom Lindon as he looked intently at a faint red mark on her bare arm that had obviously been made by the whip. He hardly knew why the fact that her uncle had struck her with the whip should make him so angry. He glanced at Colonel Rawkin. "My name is Lindon, Colonel. They told me in town that you might be able to use an extra hand in your outfit?"

"I'm afraid not," the colonel shook his gray head. "I'm not taking on any men at present, Lindon." He smiled. "Perhaps in a month or so, though. Be glad to keep you in mind."

"I see." A wave of disappointment swept over Lindon. He wanted to work on this ranch—to be near the girl, possibly to be friends with her. "Then you'll remember me if anything turns up." There was a veiled note of warning in his tone. "I wouldn't want you to forget me."

"No," the girl smiled at him. "We won't forget you, Mr. Lindon."

"You're right, Nancy," the colonel nodded.

"SORRY I busted in the way I did." Lindon turned toward the door reluctantly.

"That's quite all right, Lindon," said the colonel quickly. "Miss Lee and I understand," he smiled faintly. "I suppose I'd have done exactly the same thing if I'd heard a woman scream." He glanced at his niece. "It was merely nervousness, wasn't it, Nancy?"

Nancy did not speak. She was looking at Lindon, and her eyes seemed to be pleading with him.

"I'm hoping that I may see you again." Lindon saw the girl smile as he spoke.

He turned and hesitated, then again started for the door. He

glanced over his shoulder as he reached it. He laughed as he saw Rawkin hastily draw his hand away from the butt of his gun.

As he picked up his hat and then went to his horse, he realized that he had made a possible enemy of the ranch owner.

Nancy Lee was an unknown quantity. That Rawkin had struck her at least once with the whip had been obvious, yet she had been afraid to admit the truth.

IT was this fact that worried Lindon. He did not want Nancy to be afraid. She was too young and lovely. He found himself disliking Colonel Rawkin merely because of the fact that the elderly man had quarreled with the girl.

Lindon swung into the saddle without appearing to notice the two riders who were approaching, but he had seen them when they were still some distance away and he was very much alert.

The larger of the two men drew his mount to a halt close to Lindon. His companion did likewise, and Tom suddenly found himself staring into the muzzle of a Colt held in the hand of the big man.

"Something worrying you?" asked Lindon casually. "I'm afraid I didn't catch the name?"

"I'm 'Bull' Higgins," it was the big man who spoke.

"Mine's Lindon," Tom glanced at the other man. "And you?"

"'Keno' Drake. Not that it's any of your business, *Mister* Lindon!"

"Right," growled Higgins. "The Boss don't like strangers on this ranch. Get goin', feller!"

Lindon did not like the tone, but there were two of them, both hard looking individuals, and the big man had him covered. He was not anxious to get into a gun fight here and now. Nancy was still uppermost in his mind, he wanted to remain able to protect her if it should be necessary, so his voice was mild when he spoke.

"You been elected to speed the parting guest?" he asked with a smile. "If your boss is Colonel Rawkin, and I reckon he is, I've just been calling on him."

"Uh, huh," said 'Bull' Higgins derisively. "Now I'll tell one."

"Aw, what's the use of chinnin' with this jasper," exclaimed 'Keno' Drake suddenly. "We've got our orders, Bull, an' you know it."

"Sure," the big man scowled at Lindon. "Get out of here!"

"I'm going," said Tom quietly. "But I'll be seeing you again."

He did not wish to antagonize the two men, for he felt there was nothing to be gained by doing so. If Colonel Rawkin's two riders thought he was a mild and easily cowed individual, that might be just as well for the time being.

AS he rode away Lindon heard Higgins laugh, and there was a deliberate insult in the sound. He did not look back. He half expected one or the other of the two men to take a shot at him, but he would not give them the satisfaction of knowing he was in the least concerned.

. . . . . .

It was not until he had circled around a clump of trees that he finally gave way to his curiosity. When he had left the ranch house he had made up his mind that he would remain somewhere in the vicinity. He hoped to find the girl alone and talk to her, or at least remain close by in case she needed him.

When he was well hidden by the low hanging branches, he dismounted. He took a powerful pair of field glasses from his saddle bag,

then crept back and found a position where he could watch the ranch without being seen.

THE two men had ridden to the corral and were unsaddling their horses. Lindon watched them intently, frowning thoughtfully as he peered through the field-glasses.

That there was something wrong about this ranch he was quite certain. The actions of those he had encountered since he had reached the Rolling R all indicated an ominous undercurrent. In his estimation it was a whirlpool that centered about Nancy Lee.

Her uncle had been quarreling with her, and the two hard-faced riders that Lindon had encountered had told him that their orders were to keep strangers off the place.

Lindon felt he now understood the smirk on the fat face of the barkeeper in the Palace Saloon in the little town of Festival.

Tom had found that the man's expression puzzled him when he had asked if there was a chance of finding a job in one of the neighboring ranches.

Now Lindon wondered whether it had been Fate or a warped sense of humor upon the part of the barkeeper that had made him suggest that the Rolling R might be needing men.

As Tom watched, Higgins and Drake disappeared inside the bunkhouse.

A moment later a tall dark-haired man wearing a white Stetson and riding a gray horse trotted into Lindon's line of vision.

He grunted softly as he recognized the new arrival. Jed Gregg had been pointed out to him in Festival as the owner of the Double X ranch which adjoined the Rolling R.

Gregg rode directly to the ranchhouse and dismounted at the steps. He tied the gray to a hitching post and then went up on the porch.

Lindon continued to watch. Through the glasses he could clearly see the porch and the bunkhouse off to the left.

He saw the girl come out and speak to the tall dark-haired man. From the expression Lindon gathered that Nancy did not like Jed Gregg. He found himself very much pleased. He had been afraid that she might be in love with Gregg.

A tall blond man, evidently a cowhand, left the bunkhouse and started toward the porch.

Just as he reached the foot of the steps, Jed Gregg suddenly drew Nancy roughly to him and kissed her. As he watched them through the glasses, Lindon muttered a soft curse and half rose to his feet. He relaxed as Nancy broke away and slapped Gregg across the cheek.

THE puncher who had been coming to the house leaped up the steps of the porch. He swung at Gregg and caught him on the chin. Gregg staggered back.

"I'm rooting for the light-haired fellow," murmured Lindon as he watched, and then ruefully. "Even if it does look as though he's in love with Nancy."

Jed Gregg swung at the puncher, caught him in the chest. The blond man's fist again landed on Gregg's chin. He staggered but did not fall.

Just at that moment Colonel Rawkin appeared from the house. He spoke sharply to the two men and they stopped fighting.

The colonel seemed very angry as he said something to the waddy who had come to the girl's aid.

Nancy tried to protest, but Rawkin dismissed her words with a wave of his hand. Once again Lin-

don found himself resenting the way the girl was treated. Her uncle acted like she was a mere child who was expected to do his bidding without question.

The colonel evidently issued an order to the blond man.

The latter shrugged his shoulders, then turned and walked down off the porch and started toward the bunkhouse.

LINDON saw the colonel smile and shake hands with the tall man in the white hat. Evidently Jed Gregg was much more popular with the elderly man that he was with the girl. Rawkin said something to Nancy and they all went into the house.

Tom sighed as they disappeared. He had been gazing at Nancy through the glasses and had discovered that she had surprisingly long eye-lashes.

As he turned his glasses toward the bunkhouse, Lindon saw the blond man appear carrying his saddle. He went to the corral, roped a horse, then saddled it. He mounted and rode off without glancing again toward the ranch-house.

"Hump," murmured Lindon. "Looks like that fellow got fired for taking a sock at Jed Gregg!" He found that he was rather glad the blond man was leaving. He was evidently in love with Nancy, and Tom Lindon was jealous—though he did not quite realize it. "Well, anyway Nancy doesn't like Jed Gregg—not even a little bit."

He grinned as he raised the field-glasses to his eyes again. "Maybe there might be a chance for me. She sure has pretty eyes!"

He discovered that Bull Higgins was now standing in front of the bunkhouse. Jed Gregg appeared on the porch and motioned for Higgins to follow the blond man. The latter was now some distance along the road that lead away from the ranch toward Festival.

Higgins nodded and started toward the corral. Gregg went back into the house.

Lindon's expression was thoughtful as he lowered his glasses. He had a hunch that there was trouble blowing on the gentle summer breeze.

He looked again through the glasses and found that Higgins was saddling a horse.

"I've an idea that blond fellow won't enjoy it when Bull Higgins catches up with him," remarked Lindon to himself. "Bulls are right hard to reason with, either human or otherwise."

HE thought for a few moments. He was not overly fond of the blond man since he had discovered that he was in love with Nancy. Yet Tom always believed in fair play. He realized that the girl might also be in love with the blond man. In case this was true, Lindon decided that he had better trail Higgins and see just what happened.

"Nancy Lee," he murmured as he got to his feet. "That's sure a right pretty name."

He returned to his horse, mounted and waited patiently until the big man had ridden by on the trail of the blond puncher.

Lindon gave Higgins time to reach a turn in the road and then followed. When he rounded the curve, he found that Higgins had left the road and was cutting across country.

Tom rode after him, keeping far enough behind the other man so that Higgins did not hear his horse.

After they had ridden some distance, Lindon realized that Higgins had lead him on a short cut. They

had now returned to the road ahead of the blond man.

When Higgins reached a collection of large boulders which lined the road on either side, he turned to the right. He rode in among the big rocks and dismounted. He then led his horse back behind some trees.

Lindon had already discreetly disappeared some distance back along the road. He tied his horse to a tree, then began to circle around through the bushes and trees until he had managed to reach a place about ten yards behind Bull Higgins.

It was quite obvious that Higgins was waiting in ambush for the arrival of the blond man along the road.

Lindon disliked the idea intensely. He believed in open warfare. A man firmly planted behind a rock with a rifle in his hands, as was Higgins at the moment, had all the odds on his side.

NOT only that, but as Tom felt that the blond man was in love with Nancy, and possibly she returned his affections, it was more or less up to Lindon to come to the light-haired individual's defense. His admiration for the girl whom he had seen for the first time but a short while ago made that vital in Lindon's mind.

He heard the sound of hoofbeats on the road, and a second later the blond waddy rode in view.

Higgins raised his rifle. At the same time Lindon drew his gun. The report of Lindon's Colt was just a wee bit previous to the roar of the Winchester.

A bullet from a Colt .45 fired at ten yards does considerable damage, even though it merely creases the lower part of a man's arm.

It was evident from the adequate stream of profanity that was issuing from the lips of Bull Higgins that he was not happy at the moment.

THE blond waddy was evidently a man of foresight as well as valor. At the report of the two guns, which had blended into one in his ears during the stress of the moment, he had gone elsewhere in a hurry.

Now from a more propitious position behind a large rock on the opposite side of the road he had begun to enter into the argument. A bullet shattered the boulder in front of Higgins very slightly, but effectively.

Lindon entered into the spirit of the occasion by placing a bullet through the upper portion of Bull Higgins' hat.

The big man decided that he was being fired at from two directions, a conclusion which he should have reached some time previous.

He also became firmly convinced that he was not in a position of safety and comfort. He went away from there with far more velocity than grace. A shot from the opposite side of the road vastly increased his speed.

Lindon, feeling that to shoot a man in the back over a quarrel that was not exactly personal was bad form, admired the width of Bull Higgins' shoulders as the latter swung into the saddle and rode away.

He listened until the big man's horse could no longer be heard, then decided a little conversation with the blond man might prove interesting. Possibly the latter might be able to tell him what was going on at the ranch, and why Nancy Lee had been so frightened and worried.

Knowing that the light-haired in-

dividual might still be impulsive, and not realize the smoke of battle had cleared away, Tom Lindon stepped out onto the road with his gun reposing in its holster and his hands extended far above his head.

"SO I've got you," said the blond man as he stepped into view, covering Lindon with his gun. "Yellow, eh? You were willing to take a chance of getting me from ambush, but when you found I'd fight back you quit!"

"You're making a mistake," said Lindon calmly. "I wasn't shooting at you. It was Bull Higgins who tried to get you!"

"Higgins!" the blond man laughed. "That's where you slipped up. Bull has no reason to shoot me. Why, we were both working for the same outfit."

He scowled at the man who faced him. "I'm going to give you a chance. I'll put my gun back in the holster. When I say draw—may the best man win!"

Lindon frowned. When you had protected a man from ambush merely because you were sure that he was in love with a girl who interested you greatly, and that man refused to listen to reason, it made things difficult.

Tom had no desire to get into a gun fight with the rider from the Rolling R. If he should manage to wound the blond man that would only make things more difficult for Nancy, and Lindon did not want to hurt the girl in any way.

"I don't want any gun play," he said. "I didn't ambush you."

The blond man slowly placed his gun in his holster. His eyes were fixed on Lindon's face and his expression was hard.

"When I say draw," he repeated.

There was the sound of a horse galloping along the road. Lindon glanced behind the blond man and saw it was the girl who was rapidly approaching.

The blond man had again drawn his gun. Lindon made no move toward his own weapon.

"Steady!" the blond man looked quickly over his shoulder. "We'll finish this after Miss Lee has gone."

"Suits me," said Lindon mildly.

"Kerry!" exclaimed Nancy as she halted her horse beside them. "What is the meaning of this? Why are you holding up, Mr. Lindon?"

"Because he tried to kill me from ambush," answered Kerry, still watching Lindon.

"Don't be silly!" said Nancy impatiently. "I'm sure Mr. Lindon wouldn't do anything like that. Are you certain it wasn't Bull Higgins?"

"What makes you think it might have been Higgins?" demanded Kerry.

"Because I saw Jed Gregg send Higgins after you when you left the ranch. I was afraid something might happen to you, so I followed just as quickly as I could get away from Jed and Uncle Mark."

"Then it was Higgins!" Kerry slowly placed his gun back in his holster. He looked at the other man. "Sorry, Lindon. Looks like I had you all wrong!"

"That's all right," Lindon smiled as he moved forward and held out his hand. "We all make mistakes. Reckon I'd be right cautious of strangers myself if someone had just taken a shot at me from ambush. It was Higgins, all right. I creased his left arm and put a hole through his hat."

"YES, and Mr. Lindon came to my rescue at the ranch when Uncle Mark struck me with a whip," said Nancy. She smiled at Lindon. Looking very slender in the white linen riding habit she was now wearing.

"He struck you with a whip!" Kerry went closer to her. "If he

hurt you, darling, I'll—I'll kill him!"

"No, Kerry," Nancy smiled at him. "Uncle Mark only frightened me. I'm all right, Honey."

Lindon looked thoughtfully at the road.

It was quite obvious that these two were in love and yet he had been hoping against hope that they might not be.

He almost wished that he had not ridden up to the Rolling R that afternoon.

"Would you mind telling me what it's all about?" he asked finally. As he looked at Nancy he found she was even more lovely than he had realized at first, and he wondered why he could not have met her before she had found Kerry. "I heard you scream, came into the house, found that your uncle had been using the whip on you, but you refused to admit there was anything wrong."

"I couldn't," said Nancy. "I was afraid of Uncle Mark. But what happened to you after you left the house?"

BULL HIGGINS and Keno Drake rode up and ordered me off the ranch. I went without any argument. After I was out of sight I hid in some trees. I was watching with my field-glasses. I saw Jed Gregg arrive, and Kerry here hit after Gregg had kissed you."

"That was more than I could stand," said Kerry. "After all any man would resent his sister being mauled by Jed Gregg."

"Your what?" demanded Lindon eagerly.

"Why, his sister," Nancy smiled softly as she noticed the eagerness in the tone of the tall good-looking stranger. "Kerry is my brother. I thought you knew."

"No, I didn't," Lindon smiled, his eyes on her face. "But it sure makes it a right nice afternoon."

"Does it?" said Nancy demurely.

"It does!" Lindon looked at Kerry. "Then your last name is Lee?"

"Of course," the blond man nodded. "Kerry Lee."

"Funny—I thought you were one of the Rolling R riders and the colonel fired you for interfering."

"No. Uncle Mark, just sent me to town to get me out of the way," said Kerry. "You see he wants Nancy to marry Jed Gregg."

"What's the idea?" Lindon found his dislike for Jed Gregg was rapidly growing more intense.

"Because Uncle Mark has a dream of combining the Rolling R and the Double X and making them into the largest cattle ranch in this part of the country," answered Nancy. "Kerry and I think Jed Gregg is really much more interested in being part owner of the two ranches than he is in marrying me, even though Jed does pretend to love me."

"I don't see why anyone would have to pretend," Lindon smiled at her.

"That's mighty sweet of you, Mr. Lindon."

"The first name is Tom," Lindon found the way that one little ear peeped out from beneath the auburn hair was fascinating.

"All right, Tom," Nancy smiled at him. "You understand now?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Personally I don't like Jed Gregg—"

SOMEHOW I didn't think you would," broke in Kerry Lee dryly.

"Huh?" Lindon looked at him in surprise, and then grinned. "You figured it exactly, Kerry. Nor do I think I'd ever grow fond of Higgins or Drake."

"Where's your horse. Kerry?" asked Nancy, with a quick glance at her brother.

"Back behind some rocks further

along the road," Kerry smiled. "I'll go get him."

As he turned away Lindon went closer to the girl as she sat on her horse.

"If you want me to help you in any way I'll be glad to do all I can, Miss Lee."

"My name is Nancy," her slender fingers were playing with a carved bit of leather on the saddle horn. "I do feel that Kerry and I need your help, Tom—and I'm sure that we can depend upon you."

"Yet I'm a stranger, Nancy. A man you have never even seen before."

THERE are times when a girl can judge a man quite well the first time she sees him," said Nancy softly, and then as Kerry rode up, "Thank you, Tom," she smiled at him, "we'll be seeing you again I hope."

"I'm right certain of that," Lindon grinned.

"So am I," Kerry laughed. "Thanks, Lindon."

Tom stood watching as they rode off toward the ranch and then he went and found his horse, mounted and rode off along the road toward Festival.

. . . . . .

It was late in the afternoon when he finally reached the little town. He placed his horse in the stable of the Eagle Hotel, made sure that it was fed and watered, then secured a room for himself. He washed and then went downstairs and had something to eat.

It was just dusk as he sat on the wide veranda of the hotel talking to the proprietor, Ben Saunders. On the opposite side of the street was a small frame building that was separated from the Palace Saloon by a narrow alley. Hanging in front of the smaller building was a sign which read, ARNOLD WEAVER, JUSTICE OF THE PEACE & ATTORNEY AT LAW.

"Looks like Arnold Weaver must be a right busy man," said Lindon as he glanced at the sign.

"Yes," Saunder's nodded toward a stout bald headed man who was hurrying along the rough wooden walk that lined the street on either side. "There's Weaver now. He ain't what you'd call right popular here in town. Kind of a sharper, if you was to ask me. But there's nothin' ever been proved on him."

"Yet he's the Justice of Peace," Lindon was watching a rider who had just stopped at the hitching rail in front of the saloon. He became interested when he found it was Jed Gregg. "So he has all the authority of a local magistrate."

"Sure, an' he uses it, too," Saunders rose, lean and gray and elderly. "Reckon I'd be getting back inside. I've got a little office work to do."

"Think I'll walk around a little," Lindon got to his feet. He had discovered that Gregg had gone into Arnold Weaver's office. "I feel like stretching my legs after ridin' most of the day."

SAUNDERS merely nodded as he went inside. It had grown dark when Lindon strolled casually down the steps of the hotel. He wandered across the street.

For a few moments he stood in front of the saloon smoking a cigarette. Finally after glancing about and seeing there was no one in sight he ducked into the alley.

He crept back cautiously and silently until he stood beside an open window in Weaver's office.

"—so I'm glad the old man sent Kerry to town," said Jed Gregg. "He was beginning to get in my way. Picking a fight with me because I kissed his sister—of all the nonsense.

She liked it," he laughed. "All women like it when I kiss them."

"Risky business though, sending to ambush the boy." Weaver's voice was thick and oily. "Higgins might have killed him."

"No, Bull had my orders just to frighten Kerry. I want Kerry to understand that he had better do what the colonel and I say."

"Well, we need the Rolling R, Jed. The colonel is right when he says the combination of your place and his will make one of the largest ranches in this part of the country," Weaver's tone grew impatient. "I don't see why you have to drag the girl into it. The colonel is willing to join the ranches but you refuse until Nancy has married you."

EXACTLY," said Gregg. "I want that girl, Arnold, and I'm going to have her. The colonel knows that—that's why he is so insistent that Nancy marries me."

"Then you've got to marry the girl as soon as possible, Jed."

"Of course," agreed Gregg. "What happens after I do marry her, Arnold?"

"Quite simple," Weaver laughed. "The colonel will have an unfortunate accident that will probably prove fatal."

"You don't mean you're going to hire someone to shoot the old man?" demanded Gregg.

"Now, now, Jed," Weaver's tone was suave. "You know I wouldn't permit anything as crude as that."

"Then what?"

"As you know, the colonel always drives two horses hitched to a light wagon when he comes to town. He feels he's too old for a saddle horse."

"Yes, of course, everyone knows that."

"Very well, then, under the seat of that wagon is a box of dynamite and a number of fuse caps which I had Keno Drake and Bull Higgins place there. The box is wrapped up in some old sacks and the colonel is not at all likely to notice it.

"After you have married the girl it will happen. On one of the occasions that the colonel is driving to town someone is going to place a well aimed bullet in that box of dynamite," Weaver laughed. "I'm afraid the result will be quite disastrous for Colonel Rawkin!"

"It will be murder!" protested Gregg.

"No, merely an unfortunate accident. I made the colonel's will, so I know that he leaves the ranch, everything to Nancy. Naturally, once you've married her you should not have great difficulty in forcing the girl to turn everything over to you."

"Suppose she refuses?"

"If it comes to that, I can suggest ways of making her listen to reason," the attorney's voice grew hard. "But it is understood that you make me a partner in the ownership of the two ranches?"

"Yes, of course! That's all settled."

Lindon decided that he had heard enough. He was in a seething rage, sure that if he remained there listening any longer he would be inclined to shoot the two men in cold blood. The way they were plotting the murder of the girl's uncle—talking of Nancy as though she was some sort of object that they had decided to buy had gotten under Tom's skin.

HE started to leave the alley as cautiously as he had entered. Just as he stepped out onto the street a man standing in front of the saloon saw him.

It was Bull Higgins. During the course of the afternoon the big man had gradually become convinced that Lindon had been the man who had

interfered with his plan of ambushing Kerry Lee. The conclusion had created a vast dislike upon Higgins' part for the stranger he had ordered to leave the Rolling R. Besides his left wrist was still painful.

The big man fired as Lindon reached for his gun. Tom had not completed his draw as he staggered back and then dropped to the ground.

At the moment Kerry Lee was riding along the street, having just come into town. He saw Higgins draw and fire, and then saw Lindon drop.

Kerry fired. The bullet caught Bull Martin in the back and went through his heart. The big man's knees gave way and he sank to the ground to remain there motionless.

MEN appeared from the saloon and the other buildings along the single street of the town. They clustered around the limp form of Higgins.

In the confusion Lindon rose to his feet unharmed, having dropped merely to protect himself from further bullets upon Higgins' part. He hesitated a moment and then faded from view.

The sheriff appeared with the other men. They found Kerry still sitting on his horse, his gun in his hand. He made no protest as the sheriff arrested him for murder after having discovered that Higgins had been shot in the back.

Kerry found that Lindon had disappeared. While he wondered why the other man had deserted him he did not wish to implicate Tom, so he said nothing.

Gregg appeared and discovered it was his chance to get Kerry out of the way. He swore that there had been bad blood between Lee and Higgins. He insisted that Kerry had threatened to kill Higgins the next time he saw him.

Kerry listened in silence, mentally deciding that Jed Gregg was an adequate and beautiful liar.

Finally the sheriff and his men took Kerry off to jail.

It was not until later when he had returned to the hotel that Lindon learned what had happened. Saunders gave him the details.

"Looks bad for Kerry Lee," said the hotel keeper. "After all, he did shoot Higgins in the back."

"That's sure tough," said Lindon quietly. "I hope that Kerry Lee gets out of it all right."

He was thinking swiftly. At first he had considered going to the sheriff and explaining the part he had played in Higgins's death. He could explain that Kerry had shot Higgins because he thought the big man had killed Lindon. Kerry had obviously seen Higgins fire, and Tom drop to the ground.

Lindon finally decided against it. For all he knew the sheriff might be in league with Weaver—that was possible. He had not forgotten the conversation he had overheard between Gregg and the Justice of Peace, and he felt that if he wanted to aid Kerry and Nancy, he could probably do more good, working under cover.

IT was still fairly early in the evening. He went to the stable, got a fresh horse and started out to the Rolling R, anxious to tell Nancy what had happened.

When he reached the ranch he left his horse hidden in some trees and sneaked up to the porch.

Here he found Nancy sitting alone in the moonlight. Her face was a white oval in the shadows.

"Nancy," he whispered softly.

"Who is it?" she asked in a low

tone, peering at him as he stood half hidden by a rose bush.

"Tom Lindon."

"Oh!" she said softly. When you have been sitting alone in the moonlight dreaming about a man and he suddenly appears, it is rather startling. "What's wrong? Where's Kerry?"

SHE rose and came down the steps and stood beside him.

"That's what I came to tell you about, Nancy. Kerry's in jail. They arrested him for shooting Bull Higgins. He shot him to avenge me, thought that Higgins had killed me. I dropped when Higgins fired at me."

"But why should they arrest Kerry?" Nancy demanded. "He was only defending you."

"Yes, I know. But Kerry killed Higgins—shot him in the back."

"But surely you could explain, Tom?"

She came closer to him, and he found himself very conscious of her nearness.

"No, not yet. I ducked out of sight during the excitement before I even knew they had arrested Kerry. When I learned about it, I decided that I had better keep under cover if I wanted to help you and Kerry," he caught her hand in his. "And I do want to help you, Nancy—always."

"But Tom," she made no attempt to withdraw her hand. "Kerry's in jail—are you going to let him stay there."

"How can I? He's your brother, Nancy—and I—"

"What, Tom?"

"Reckon it sounds right silly after only knowing you for a day—but I—I love you, Nancy."

"Oh, Tom," her voice was soft in the shadows. "I believe you."

"Don't you see, Honey. I had to keep under cover. They might have put me in jail, too, and I couldn't have done anything then."

"But you're sure that Kerry's all right?"

"Yes, Nancy. I just wanted to tell you—to tell you what had happened," she adored his shyness. "You mustn't worry."

"Then you'll do all you can to get Kerry out of jail?" Suddenly her lips brushed his cheek, and then she moved away from him swiftly. Now—Tom?"

"Of course," he laughed softly. "You sure are sweet."

"I'm depending on you, Tom."

"Is that all?"

"All that I'm going to tell you now," she laughed as she went back up the steps of the porch.

Lindon hurried back to his horse. He did not realize that Keno Drake had been watching him, he had thought only of Nancy.

As Lindon rode away, Drake mounted his horse and followed. He had been going to town in search of Higgins. When he had seen Lindon sneaking up to the porch, he had become curious. He had crept closer, like a moving shadow, until finally he had been able to overhear all that Nancy and Tom had said.

Drake was cold and ruthless as he started in pursuit. Bull Higgins had been his partner of sorts for years. They had always been rough, hard men, but they had been loyal to each other. If Tom Lindon had aided in the killing of Bull Higgins, then Drake was going to have his revenge.

KENO DRAKE was only a few yards behind Lindon when they reached the road beyond the ranch. Tom heard the clatter of hoofs behind him and realized that he was being followed.

Lindon drew his gun and swung around in the saddle. Drake's .45

belched flame in the moonlight. Lindon fired wildly and missed as had Drake.

Their horses were tearing along the road, going at a full gallop. A man dashing through the night on a rapidly moving horse does not present a very good target. Neither man had any real chance to aim, their shots merely tore through the darkness.

Drake found that his gun was empty just as Lindon fired the last shot in his weapon. Keno swung his horse around, started back along the road, anxious to get out of range long enough to reload. He did not realize that Tom's gun was also empty.

Lindon swerved his mount and started after the other man. Their horses were drawing closer and closer. Finally they were riding side by side.

With a sudden kick, Lindon freed his feet from the stirrups. He leaped from the saddle, caught Drake in a flying tackle and brought him to the ground.

They landed in some soft sand, both jarred and breathless, but a moment later they were fighting desperately. Pounding, beating at each other as they staggered to their feet. Lindon drew back his left arm.

His fist landed on Drake's chin with all of Tom's weight behind it. Keno staggered back. Lindon's right fist followed his left, and Drake dropped to the ground, knocked out completely.

TOM bent over Keno and found that he was unconscious. He picked up Drake's gun and threw it in some bushes. Satisfied that the other man would not bother him any further for the time being, Lindon started to look for his horse. He finally found it a little further along the road. Drake's mount had completely disappeared.

Lindon climbed into the saddle and rode back to Festival. When he reached the hotel, he put the horse in the stable. As he walked out in front of the hotel, he discovered that there was a light in Weaver's office. Acting upon a sudden impulse, he again sneaked silently into the alley.

"It couldn't be better," Lindon heard Weaver say as he again stood outside the open window. "We've got things going our way. Kerry Lee is in jail for the murder of Higgins. When the colonel finds that his nephew is accused of being a murderer—he's going to hit the ceiling. I'll tell him that I can free Kerry if Nancy will marry you right away."

"What if she refuses?" demanded Gregg.

"She won't, when she knows it's to save her brother. I think we'd better ride out to the ranch in the morning. Since I'm a justice of the peace I can marry you at once."

FINE, the sooner the better," Gregg laughed. "I wouldn't mind having Nancy as my wife at all. Particularly as the ranch goes with her."

"All right," said Weaver. "Meet me here at seven in the morning, and we'll ride out to the Rolling R."

Lindon moved away hastily. He managed to get out of the alley and back to the hotel without being seen.

After thinking the situation over carefully, he decided to go back to the Rolling R. When he reached the ranch, he intended to try and convince Colonel Rawkin that Gregg and Weaver were plotting against him.

Lindon found the colonel and Nancy in the living room when he reached the ranch-house. At first the elderly man refused to listen when Tom tried to tell him what he had overheard.

"It's all a pack of lies!" exclaimed Rawkin angrily. "I know Jed Gregg, wouldn't think of letting him marry my niece if I wasn't sure he is absolutely honest and trustworthy—"

"I've been trying to tell you that Gregg and Weaver are just working to get this ranch," interrupted Lindon. "When Gregg has married Nancy you're going to have a fatal accident. Weaver plans—"

"No!" roared the colonel. "I won't listen! I feel that Arnold Weaver is a man respected by all who know him. Why, he's my attorney," Rawkin scowled.

"I don't like your attitude, Lindon. Ever since you came bursting in here this afternoon you've been showing far too much interest in affairs which do not concern you in the least. Now you get out—and I must insist that you stay off the Rolling R!"

JUST a moment, Colonel!" Lindon spoke firmly. "You're going to listen to me now! Either you do as I say or I'll swear you tried to assault your niece with a whip in order to force her to marry Jed Gregg!"

"Why—I—" stammered Rawkin. "I did nothing of the kind!"

"Yes, you did, Uncle," said Nancy. "You struck me twice with the whip. I still have a mark on my back, and one on my arm. I don't know what would have happened if Tom Lindon hadn't appeared when he did. I wasn't going to say any more about it, but I shall speak if you force me to marry a man that I despise, and I hate Jed Gregg."

"I think you'd better give me just a week in which to convince you Gregg and Weaver are not the sort of men you think they are," Lindon spoke quietly. "They are coming here in the morning, and are going to insist that Nancy marries Gregg right away."

"Oh, they are!" said the colonel with an abrupt change of front. "Well, I refuse to be hurried," he frowned as he stroked his gray beard. "All right, Lindon, I'll give you a week. But if at the end of that time I'm still sure Jed Gregg is all I think him to be I must insist on the marriage." He glanced at his niece. "Well, Nancy?"

Nancy looked anxiously at Lindon. He smiled at her and nodded, sure that he could produce enough evidence against Gregg and Weaver within a week's time to convince Colonel Rawkin that they were both unscrupulous individuals.

"All right, Uncle Mark," said Nancy finally. "If you still want me to do so, I'll marry Jed Gregg after a week has passed."

"Splendid!" the colonel smiled. "I'm glad that we understand each other better." He yawned. "And now it's rather late, Mr. Lindon. If you'll pardon us, I'm sure both Nancy and I need our night's rest."

"Of course, Colonel," Lindon nodded and then glanced at the girl. I'll be seein' you tomorrow." He smiled as she lowered her eyes. Good-night, Nancy—don't worry."

"All right, Tom." Nancy's eyes were soft as she looked into his for a moment. She smiled shyly. "Good-night."

Lindon went to the door. He had deliberately refrained from telling the colonel that Kerry Lee was in jail charged with the murder of Bull Higgins. He had felt that it was up to Nancy to tell her uncle what had happened to her brother, yet he realized that the girl might have decided to say nothing as she was depending on him to get Kerry free.

Tom mounted his horse and rode away in the direction of Festival. He half expected that Keno Drake had returned to the ranch and might take a shot at him any second, but he saw no sign of the other man.

It was midnight when Lindon got back to town. For the next hour he was exceedingly active. So much so that early morning found a deputy neatly bound and gagged at the jail. Two fresh horses were missing from the hotel stable, and Kerry Lee was very much absent from his cell.

Shortly after seven-thirty the next morning Jed Gregg and Arnold Weaver arrived at the Rolling R. They had learned that Kerry had escaped and had evidently been assisted by someone else in getting away from the jail. Realizing that Kerry and his unknown friend might interfere with their plans they were anxious to have Nancy go through with her marriage to Gregg as quickly as possible.

MUCH to their surprise they found that the light wagon the colonel always drove was standing in front of the ranch house with the horses hitched and ready. Rawkin was just about to depart for Festival, Nancy having finally told him that Kerry had been arrested and placed in jail for killing Bull Higgins. However, upon the arrival of the two men the colonel went back into the house with them.

"I thought if you have no objections, Colonel," Gregg glanced at Nancy as she appeared in the living room. "We might go through with the ceremony this morning. Weaver is a justice of the peace, and he can marry us at once."

"But I do object, gentlemen," said Rawkin. "I refuse to be rushed into a matter of this sort. I must have at least a week to consider the matter carefully from all angles."

"You'll do as we say!" Gregg's tone abruptly grew threatening. "I'm going to marry Nancy this morning whether you like it or not!"

"I won't stand for it!" Colonel Rawkin reached for his gun.

Weaver had been standing close to the elderly man, and a little behind him. The attorney's gun suddenly crashed down on the colonel's head. Nancy screamed as her uncle dropped to the floor in an unconscious heap.

She started to run out of the room but Jed Gregg grabbed her by the arm and held her firmly so she could not get away.

"Now we'll proceed with the ceremony," said Weaver quietly.

He started to read the marriage ceremony. A moment later Lindon and Kerry burst into the room with their guns drawn.

"That's enough of that," said Lindon sharply.

The attorney turned, drew his gun and fired. The bullet soared just above Lindon's ear. The latter's gun roared and Weaver dropped to the floor. He lay there very still.

Gregg swung the girl in front of him, using her as a shield as he edged toward the door.

Lindon and Kerry were in the room, trying to edge around Gregg. He reached the door with Nancy still shielding him, managed to slam it shut as he stepped out onto the porch.

HE swung the girl up in his arms as he dashed down the steps toward the light wagon. He placed Nancy on the seat beside him as he started the horses and drove away at a gallop.

Lindon reached the door and flung it open. Kerry was close behind him as he ran out on the porch. The blond man raised his gun and fired at Gregg.

"Don't shoot!" shouted Lindon as he ran for his horse. "There's dynamite in that wagon."

He reached his horse and swung into the saddle, then rode hard and fast. By the time the wagon reach-

ed the road Lindon's horse was drawing closer. Finally he was riding beside the wagon. He leaned far out of the saddle, grabbed the girl as she rose on the seat and leaped toward him. He swung her away from the wagon and onto his horse.

"Nancy," he exclaimed as he held her in his arms. "Are you all right?"

"Quite all right now, darling," Nancy said softly.

Gregg was no longer interested in the girl. His one thought was to get away as quickly as possible. The horses were running wildly as the wagon tore down the road.

Keno Drake had been waiting behind a rock in the hope of ambushing Lindon whom he had seen go to the ranch with Kerry.

The wagon interested him greatly. He had been hired by Weaver to place the box of dynamite and fuse caps in the wagon in order to blow up Colonel Rawkin.

Drake had heard the firing from the ranch, seen Lindon and Kerry and realized that the game was up. He decided to carry out his part of the bargain. Weaver would doubtlessly be glad to get rid of the colonel.

Gregg was wearing a white silk handkerchief around his neck. Now as it blew against his chin it appeared from the distance like the gray beard of the colonel.

AFTER one quick glance Keno Drake took careful aim with his rifle and fired. The bullet struck the box of dynamite with surprisingly disastrous results.

There was a very effective boom, and bits of wagon, horses and Gregg were scattered about the surrounding territory.

Fortunately Lindon and the girl were some distance away, out of sight in the turn of the road as was Kerry Lee.

The colonel had recovered consciousness and managed to stagger out onto the porch. From here he had seen Lindon rescue Nancy from the wagon, seen Gregg drive on and then heard the explosion.

"What happened?" asked Nancy after she had heard the loud boom.

"There was dynamite in the wagon," answered Lindon hoarsely. "Someone must have taken a shot at Gregg and hit the box," he frowned. "I'm sure thankful I got you off that wagon in time, honey."

"So am I!" exclaimed Kerry who had ridden up and heard what they had said. "That sure was close, Nancy."

"Look!" exclaimed Lindon nodding toward a group of horsemen who had appeared on the road.

AS the group drew closer they found it was a posse lead by the sheriff in search of Kerry. They had seen Keno Drake fire at the wagon and had captured him. The latter, finding he was in a difficult position, deemed it wise to talk.

Lindon explained to the sheriff why Kerry had shot Higgins, and after hearing the whole story Sheriff Ways told Kerry that he was free.

It was not until some time later that the Rolling R once more settled down to its normal activities. The sheriff and his posse had cleaned up the results of the explosion, found that Weaver was dead, and departed, taking the body with them.

"You certainly proved you were right after all, Lindon," said the colonel. "I'll always be eternally grateful. I've been a blind old fool. I'm sorry." He glanced at his niece. "Can you forgive me, Nancy?"

"Of course, Uncle Mark," Nancy went to him and kissed him on the cheek.

"And you, Kerry?" Rawkin looked anxiously at his nephew.

"Sure, Uncle." Kerry took the elderly man's hand. "Let's forget it."

"Thank you, Kerry," said the colonel. "That job is waiting if you want it, Lindon. Most of the men are out on the range now, but I could use another good puncher."

"I'll only take it on one condition," said Lindon slowly. "And that's up to Nancy."

"What's she got to do with it?" asked Rawkin in surprise.

"Marry me," said Lindon softly.

"Oh, I see," the colonel smiled. "Well, Nancy?"

"I—I'm afraid Tom gets both jobs," said Nancy shyly.

REMEMBER a cow hand doesn't get much money," said Rawkin.

"Nancy won't starve," Lindon grinned. "I had a little ranch down on the border for some years. Just sold it at a right good price about a month ago and started drifting around.

"Maybe there be a chance of buying the Double X in time—and combining the two ranches like you planned, Colonel."

PERHAPS," Rawkin smiled and then glanced at Kerry. "Oh, Kerry come in the house—there's something I want to talk to you about."

"Right, Uncle Mark," Kerry grinned as he followed the elderly man inside leaving Lindon and Nancy alone on the porch.

"Your uncle sure is a man of tact," remarked Tom as he took Nancy in his arms. "You said you might tell me something later when I asked you last night, honey. What was it?"

"That I love you," said Nancy softly.

"That's all I want to know," said Lindon as he kissed her.

COWHAND'S PROPOSAL

When evenin' comes acros't the hills,
An' daily chores are done,
My thoughts they keep a-runnin' on
An' I just think o' one—

An' that one, can't yuh guess it,
Ain't anyone but you—
I'd like to lasso yuh fer life
An' would y' like it, too?

—BUCK HUDSON.

Alias John Alden

Two Men And A Girl Form a Western Love Triangle in this Fascinating Story of a Proposal by Proxy

By JOHN KEITH BASSETT

Author of "Devil's Cliff," "The Last Bullet," etc.

THE soft wind of early May blew gently on Nita Martin's tanned cheeks and rippled her rough tweed skirt and white blouse as she stood pensively in the doorway of the district schoolhouse. Down the road to Prairie Dog and south over brown rangeland, little knots of her pupils wended their homeward way. But Nita scarcely saw them.

She was thinking of Cliff Graham of the Bar T Ranch, and Fred Beckly, owner of the prosperous Slash Circle.

Nita thought she knew how Cliff felt toward her, and she was surer every day of her fondness for him. But the tall, habitually smiling Graham was diffident and shy. Soon Fred Beckly would press her with a definite proposal of marriage which she would be unable to side-step as she had overlooked his increasing ardor of the last several months.

If only Cliff spoke first, so that she would not have to refuse Beckly!

She had not noticed a wide-shouldered rider coming from the west, and was startled when he turned into the schoolyard. With a woman's impulsive concern for her appearance, she patted the glossy brown hair, combed smoothly back from her forehead, glanced hastily over her costume, and felt tell-tale warmth in her cheeks as Graham swung to earth and strode grinning toward her.

"How are you, Nita?" He doffed his sombrero. "I—er—just happened to be headin' for Prairie Dog, so I thought if you were ready to go home—"

He left off, bashful as ever. "Why, yes, Cliff. I expected you for the dance tonight, but of course I like company riding home. Will you please get my mare while I lock up?"

SHE fastened the doors and dropped the key into her pocket. Her heart seemed to speed, and a flush deepened in her cheeks. She could not help wondering what had brought Cliff—unless it was that he had summoned courage—Nita resolved to help. At the dance tonight Beckly might propose, unless word got around beforehand that she and Cliff—

"I—er—came on a sort of errand," he said hesitatingly, while their horses trudged down the dusty road. "Fred Beckly asked me to speak to you about something."

"Fred asked you to? What is it?"

"Well," he said, staring at his saddle horn, "I didn't want to ask you, but he insisted. In fact, Nita," Cliff blurted out, "Fred wants me to find out if you'll marry him. He's a mighty fine—"

Her startled look stopped him.

They collided and fell crashing to the floor. A gun-shot split the room

Amazement crossed her face, and for an instant she could not speak. "You mean that—that he sent you here to—to ask if I would marry him? That you are a sort of, well, ambassador, supposed to arrange everything? Propose to me in his name?"

He nodded. Then as her stunned look faded and she laughed aloud, Graham jerked worriedly erect. He stared hard at her as his face slowly colored. Nita laughed again, as though she found it extremely amusing. "It's like the poem I'm reading to my pupils," she gasped finally.

"You know, Cliff—the Courtship of Miles Standish, by Longfellow. In which Standish sent John Alden to ask Priscilla's hand. He didn't dare go himself—he, who had fought Indians without knowing fear! But Alden was more of a ladies' man."

"Reckon I never read that one," the Bar T owner broke in hastily. "Don't reckon Fred ever read it, either."

"Then I must tell you, Cliff. It was back in early New England, in the first Pilgrims settlement. Priscilla was the girl John Alden loved. But Miles Standish asked John to arrange for her to become Mrs. Standish. How could he refuse his best friend? So he did ask Priscilla,

though John wanted her himself! Then—"

"But Nita, what's this got to do with Beckly and me? Gosh, Fred's well fixed. He's a mighty good cattleman, and I reckon—"

"Please, let me tell you the rest of the story. Priscilla listened while John Alden told what a wonderful man Miles Standish was, what a great fighter, a great leader—and a bachelor. When at last he finished, there was a long silence. Priscilla knew with a woman's intuition that Alden loved her. So she asked: 'Why don't you speak for yourself, John?' "

"Sure, but Alden had promised to fix things for this other chap. Wouldn't have been right for him to go throwin' his own rope when prob'ly Standish was pacin' the floor of his ranch house, dog-eager to learn how John made out with the gal!"

Cliff stopped abruptly. His eyes met Nita's, then each glanced away. Cold fear swept over her that perhaps she had said too much, shown herself immodest in thus speaking out.

They rode on in silence save for the clop-clop of hoofbeats. Finally Graham heaved a long sigh. "I don't hardly reckon Fred ever read that poem, Nita. Anyhow, he asked me to speak to you about him. Of course, I had to say I would, although most times a man ought to do his own proposin'. Er—don't you think so, Nita?"

SHE nodded, smiling bravely. "Yes, he certainly should. A man ought to speak out what is in his heart."

Graham turned and looked at her. "There's no doubt about him bein' crazy about you. He can support a wife, too, give her just about everything. Got one of the finest spreads around here."

"You have a good ranch too, Cliff."

The words escaped her almost before she realized she was going to speak. His swift alarm made her afraid to face him, and she waited with blood pounding hard at her temples. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Graham re-seat his curl-brimmed sombrero.

"Oh, my place is all right. Fred's got a few enemies around the county, but I reckon in general he's pretty well liked. Reckon Mrs. Beckly would sort of be somebody."

NITA could not know her mare would shy at that bit of paper lying in the road. One instant the animal trudged with drooping head, and the next it lurched violently to the right. The jerk came with such breathless speed that for thought of Cliff's loyal efforts to praise his friend, the schoolmistress was wholly unprepared.

The shoulders of the two horses smacked together and Cliff's roan reared frightenedly. That increased the mare's panic and of a sudden she bolted, the bit between her teeth, eyes dilated and nostrils distended as she burst into a headlong run.

One of Nita's small booted feet loosed from its stirrup. She would have toppled off had not Graham, acting with the instant decision of a trained horseman, spurred close beside and snatched her bridle. Thrusting an arm around her waist, he lifted her completely free while the startled animal tugged at the reins Cliff had instantly dropped over his saddle horn.

She clung to him, her cheek against his checkered shirt, her chestnut hair touching Cliff's chin. There was an intimate, worried pressure which with a sudden pang of conscience he relaxed. He lowered her gently to the road, swung from his own mount, and set about quieting the mare.

When he turned it was to find Nita's eyes soft and glowing, while two spots of color burned in her cheeks. "Thank you," she said coolly. "At the very least you saved me a sprained shoulder."

"Shucks, that wasn't anything. Reckon Fred would've been handier'n I was. Fred would have—"

"Oh, please!" she burst out. "Don't talk Fred, Fred, Fred to me! You know very well, Cliff Graham, or you certainly ought to know, that I never could marry him. I half believe Fred Beckly would never look at me if Uncle Bob's share of the Ace Mine mightn't be worth a great deal!

"But I'd rather drive one of Uncle's stages from Prairie Dog to Sundance every day of my life, or be a schoolmarm till I'm seventy, than to marry a man I don't love. No matter how important a citizen he is, nor how fine a spread he owns! I—"

HER face flushed hotly as Graham's jaw slacked in astonishment. Suddenly she felt ashamed of her outburst, ashamed of making him feel badly. "I'm sorry," she said in a low tone. "I'm afraid you'll have to report that your mission wasn't successful. Cliff, a person should speak what is in his own heart, and not just be content to run errands for others!"

Nita Martin climbed astride her mare. Clicking bootheels to its ribs, she started at a brisk trot for Prairie Dog, lying just over a low swell. Graham, she knew without looking back, followed close behind. He was so—so awfully helpful to others that he sacrificed his own interests merely because someone more cunning asked a favor.

She had never before said that about Beckly having an eye on Uncle Bob's mine stock; nevertheless she meant it. Just the other day he had offered to buy the stock, and had become angry when told it was not for sale. Nita, whose only relative was the elderly stage driver, would some day inherit that stock. The Ace Mine was booming with two new veins of gold that promised untold wealth. Uncle Bob Martin's small interest might conceivably amount to a tidy fortune, and it was not beyond Beckly to consider that in asking Nita's hand.

They drew rein before a neat white cottage at one end of Prairie Dog's single street. Fred emerged from a pool hall half a block away and, spying them, hurried nearer. His round, ruddy face wore a confident smile as, ducking under the hitching rail, he took Nita's reins and tied them himself.

Then Beckly doffed his Stetson in an awkward imitation of the cavalier. "S'pose Cliff's been kind of discussin' things with you, Nita?" he said in his booming, vibrant tones. "You know, it sort of makes a man uneasy to brag about his own virtues and how he'd be willing to hitch up with some gal that's young and purty.

"In fact, someone like yourself," he hazarded with increased confidence. Fred chuckled. "I might as well come out with it: Cliff proposed, didn't he?"

SHE nodded. "Yes, he proposed for you, Fred."

"Darned nice of you, Cliff. Say," he hinted, and jerked his head. "I'll meet you later, eh? Now, Nita," the Slash Circle owner went on as he took both her shapely hands in his stubby palms, "what say we tell your uncle? And how soon do you reckon we'll get hitched?"

She eyed him with cool disdain while very firmly she withdrew her hands. "Fred, I'm not a horse that

you speak of my being hitched. If you mean married, the answer is never."

A scowl followed the initial blank look of the man. He stepped back with incredulity, drooping the corners of his mouth. "You—turned the proposition *down?*"

Nita Martin could scarcely hide the thrill of triumph that surged warmly through her at putting Mr. Fred Beckly in his place. For from the astonishment on his round countenance, he had not even regarded it as a remote possibility that she would refuse!

Cliff hesitated a few yards away, watching them. Of a sudden Beckly came to life. Lunging under the hitch rail, he strode to his ambassador. "You double-crossed me, Cliff Graham — dead-set on purpose!" Nita heard his teeth grind for the rage that possessed him. His hand sought the Colt that rode on his thigh. "I got a good mind to drill you for it! I'll—"

"Stop!" With bootheels clicking on the board sidewalk, she darted between them. "Don't you dare to draw!" Nita cried in withering scorn. "Oh, I—you think I'm a horse, talking about being hitched. You send another to ask your question, just to prevent him from speaking for himself!

"It's all very plain," she hurried on before he could speak. "Yet you seem to think I'm so stupid I can't see. Why didn't you ask me yourself? Because you wanted to trap Cliff. You knew he—I—we both—"

NITA'S eyes had encountered the thunderstruck Graham. She choked back hot words that pelted to her lips, and simply gazed at Fred with such contempt that of a sudden he released the butt of his gun. With a sullen, vengeful look back, he strode off down the sidewalk.

Cliff stood twisting the tongue of his cartridge belt. "Gosh!" he breathed. "I sort of wish you hadn't flown off the handle, Nita. It isn't that I'm scared of Fred. There's nothin' I'd like better than to knock that wooden block of his into the dust." He frowned downward. "But if I know Beckly, there'll be plenty o' trouble now!"

He stepped to his roan, mounted, and headed at a fast gallop down the street and out of Prairie Dog, toward his Bar T Ranch.

During dinner with her Uncle Bob, the girl kept wondering whether Cliff would forget their engagement to attend the dance at the Town Hall. She was too well known to be absent from such an affair without causing comment, especially in view of her presence at every dance during the last six months with either Graham or Fred Beckly.

BUT Cliff did come, driving a buckboard and stopping before the cottage, a little after eight. There was something strange in his manner, an invisible wall between them as though he bore a great weight on his mind.

Nita kissed Uncle Bob, who was staying behind to guard the Ace Mine shipment of gold his stage had brought, and which he would take to the railroad tomorrow. She tripped down the sidewalk with her hand on Cliff's arm, chatting in masked gaiety.

But his answers were brief, as though his thoughts were far away. "You don't seem very cheerful tonight, Cliff," she said as they approached the entrance to the hall where laughing, chatting couples waited in line for tickets. From within floated gay music, and Nita knew that already the affair was in full sway, with a large attendance of townsfolk, cowgirls, punchers, and

ranchers and their wives from all parts of the country.

"Well, I don't feel so awful coltish," Cliff said.

"Why not?"

Before he could reply, Jack Hallman, who operated a weekly newspaper and job printing establishment, worked closer through the throng. "I got proofs to them posters, Cliff; want to see 'em?"

He handed over several printed sheets which Nita could not help but see. Her eyes widened startledly at a single word in large type across the top. It was "AUCTION."

"Why!" she whispered. "Are you selling out?"

HE returned the posters. "Guess they'll do all right, Jack." Surrendering his tickets to the doorman, he steered Nita inside the hall. But as they started over the waxed floor in a waltz, her worried eyes held on his face and she demanded why he planned to auction his Bar T holdings.

"Got a note," was the brief answer. "Can't meet it or extend it."

"But surely you could get someone to loan you the money?"

"No, reckon not."

She watched him anxiously. "Who holds your note?"

"Oh—Fred Beckly."

The girl caught her breath. "And because of this afternoon, he won't renew?"

"Well, it's a pretty big note. Fred thinks I deliberately spoiled his chances with you. The Sundance bank won't reopen for awhile, and no rancher'll loan me the money unless Fred says my Bar T is sound. He's kind of an authority, you know. Only thing to do is to liquidate, and I sure won't get much that way."

She fell silent, conscious of a deep sense of guilt. Yet how could she have acted differently? "Cliff," she pleaded on impulse, "you wouldn't have me say I love Fred when I don't?"

The music stopped and couples applauded for an encore. Graham gave her a curious look. "Seems like you've gone with him quite a few places lately. I mean, it looks funny for a girl to go out with a man she doesn't like."

Nita bit her lip and looked away. She longed to say that by accepting Beckly's attentions she had hoped to make Cliff realize his own need for her. So that he would become more aggressive and forceful—

But while she hesitated, Harry Bain claimed her as partner. Nita tried to forget her worries in the gay chatter and verve of the next several dances. She had only two more with Cliff before he unaccountably disappeared. Excusing herself, she sought him outside, but he seemed nowhere around.

That was strange. Presently Sue McDonald, a piquant blonde, asked in the presence of several young folk where Graham had gone. "I haven't seen you dancing with him," Sue observed slyly.

NITA forced a smile. "It's some business or other Cliff has on hand. He'll be back after a while." She left the group, striving to hide the anxiety that troubled her breast. Such a masquerade would be difficult to maintain, especially if Cliff did not return very soon.

"Howdy, Nita. Let's have this dance."

With a start she recognized Beckly, and swallowing her dismay, sought some excuse. "I—don't feel like dancing this time, Fred." And she turned to sit in one of the wall seats.

He slumped down at her side. "Don't feel like it myself," he returned promptly. Staring at him,

Nita realized the man had been drinking.

But no escape offered until Hal Berry, the freckled foreman of Cliff's Bar T, asked her to dance. Nita rose quickly but felt Fred's hand on her arm. He too lumbered to his feet. "She don't feel like it, Hal, so we're sittin' out."

"Oh, I—I do feel like it now. Thanks, Hal. Shall we dance?" With coolness she by no means felt, she put her arm around the waddie's neck and almost before he knew it, they were gliding away. For an instant it seemed Fred would make a scene; then muttering, he turned and left the hall.

"Hal," the girl asked breathlessly, "where did Cliff go?"

BERRY laughed, unaware of her apprehension. "If you don't know, I guess nobody would, Nita!"

She did not pursue the subject, and had the next dance with Harry Bain, his second of the evening. "Say," he said slowly as they wandered outside in quest of cooler air, "I reckon I ought to tell you that folks are kind of goin' like magpies tonight. You know I'd only mention it for your own good, don't you?" he added.

Nita's heartbeat seemed to double. "Why, yes, Harry. You mean people are gossiping?"

Bain was honest and sincere, a true friend. "'Course lots of times these things don't amount to anything. But Fred's over in the saloon talkin' and takin' on quite some load of red-eye. He's tellin' everybody you'll come down off your high hoss when Cliff gets nabbed. Found out for the crook he is."

"Crook! Why Cliff Graham is honest as—" Nita paused. "What does he mean?"

"Search me. Kind of makes out Cliff did something and'll get caught up for it mighty soon. But you know Beckly: the fuller he gets of Dutch courage, the more he raves on. Says Cliff is sure one double-crossin' crook." She turned away, frowning. "Let's go inside again, Harry."

Bain, who had the next dance with Miriam Smart, was loathe to leave her alone at the side of the hall. Nita was not accustomed to playing wallflower, and the fixed smile on her oval countenance was more and more difficult to maintain as thoughts rushed through her mind, revolving around the single question: why had Cliff deserted her? Suddenly a chubby hand touched her wrist and she felt herself lifted. It was Beckly again, wearing a thin sneer on his red face flushed with liquor. "Reckon there's no good way outa this dance, eh, Nita?"

"Please, I—"

"Aw, I don't bite. Look here," the rancher went on, his eyes glinting into hers from but a few inches away, "I don't harbor no grudge; we'll let bygones be bygones and stay pals, eh?"

OF A sudden she was in his arms, and Beckly began clumsily to move his feet. But his heavy riding boots only trod hers; she was not dancing with him, not if he made her writhe in pain! Several couples paused to watch, uncertain whether this was a mock-quarrel or quite genuine.

"Fred! Stop this at once!"

Bain and Hal Berry started to her rescue, their faces grim. But they were too late. "Let her go, Beckly—you hear me?"

It was Graham who shoved roughly between them, his face pale, his breath coming in quick gasps as though he had run a considerable distance. Fred's jaw clicked ominously. "Keep oughta this unless you're lookin' for trouble!"

"That's just what I am. Get back, you common stick-up, or I'll—"

"Cliff!"

He had not missed Beckly diving for his gun. Cliff could have whipped out his own weapon, but the proximity of wide-eyed dancers told him that some innocent person was certain to get hurt. So, gathering his muscular frame, he sprang, on sinews of steel. They collided and fell crashing to the floor. A gunshot split the room.

NITA uttered a cry. Graham's right sleeve was crimsoning near the shoulder. As she watched, the battlers scrambled erect, separated, and clashed again. Each was slugging with all his might, taking and giving hard blows. Beckly jerked his knee up to end the fight, but Cliff landed a terrific thrust of knuckles to the man's drooling mouth. He followed with another blow to the jaw—and the Slash Circle owner sprawled heavily, slid a few feet on the waxed floor, and lay panting. Cliff mopped perspiration from his forehead with a movement of his arm. "Harry—Hal—bring him to the sheriff's office. Now!"

Then he seized Nita's arm and steered her from the hall. "You're shot!" she exclaimed anxiously.

He stopped. "I'm—all right. But Nita, there's something—Your Uncle Bob—"

"Oh! He isn't dead!"

Graham shook his head. "Just shot up some, but he'll recover. I'm sure sorry I left you alone, Nita, but after our dance I'd just stepped outside when three hombres jumped on me. In the tussle I got this crease in my side before some men came along. I didn't want to worry you, so I started for Doc Tracy's. But when I got to your Uncle Bob's, I felt dizzy."

"Yes?" She waited, her brown eyes wide with alarm.

"He patched me up and we sat talkin'. I told Bob what happened this afternoon, and about my ranch, and all. Of a sudden those same toughs broke in. Bob killed one, and we grabbed the other. Couple of breeds."

"They didn't get the mine gold?"

He grunted. "The scheme was to slug me, plant me in your uncle's house, kill Bob if necessary, and steal the dust. So it would look like I was one of the thieves but got knocked out before Bob died. And Nita, who do you think put 'em to all that? We made those gents talk! It was our old friend, Beckly."

She stepped back. "Fred! He—yes," she interrupted herself swiftly, "Harry Bain said he was bragging that you would soon be found out for a crook. Oh, Cliff!"

HE took both her hands and drew her closer. "You thought it was plumb queer that I'd ride out to ask you to marry him? But Fred said if I put it over he'd extend that note on my spread." Her eyes blazed, and all color drained from her cheeks as the girl tore herself free. "You mean you would do a thing like that for *money?* Cliff Graham, I'll never, never—"

"Listen, Nita—wait! I had to know if you loved Beckly or me. Didn't I? If you'd accepted Fred I'd have been just about done. I mean, heartbroken. I'd have—well—"

His face changed slowly as he watched her, to a wan, pleading grin. "You love me, don't you?"

The brown eyes searched his a long moment before they wavered. "I never knew you to be so bold; why, you've been holding my hands for hours. And you talked right out!" She added musingly: "In Longfellow's poem, there was—"

He interrupted with an eager, fervent kiss. "Priscilla married John, didn't she? Ought to have, anyhow. Just like me. Graham of the Bar T spread—alias John Alden!"

The Renegade of Painted Mesa

Crouched side by side they settled down to a steady exchange of fire

An Exciting, Thrill-Packed Story of a Girl's Courage During Perilous Combat

By RUTH ANDERSON

Author of "West Point Girl," "Dreams for Two," etc.

NORMA LEWIS pulled her calico pony to a halt on a small rise and drank in the pine-scented breeze that came in gentle waves over Painted Mesa. She gazed off across the purple-shadowed canyons and arroyos with eyes that sparkled with the joy of seeing the friendly and restful hills again.

The figure of the girl perched erect

on the patch pony, divided skirt, and cream sombrero cocked jauntily over a wild tangle of chestnut curls, blended smoothly with its background of juniper studded bluffs and jagged buttes.

BEFORE her the broken lands extended as far as she could see, making jagged outlines on two sides, rough natural boundaries that separated her father's B-L Ranch from the barren wastes on the other side of the divide. But now the sharp crags were softened in the afternoon sun, and the sawtooth hills took on shadows in grotesque and lovely shapes and shades.

As the girl relaxed on her horse drinking in the loveliness of her old home, she was utterly unconscious of her immediate surroundings. The juniper and pine covered crag beside the trail formed a table a bit higher than her head, a thicket of tangled shrubbery to which she gave no attention at the moment.

On the tableland and several yards behind her a slinking yellow form crept forward on noiseless padded feet. Step by silent step, belly to the ground, it skimmed through its green concealment.

Now it was directly over the girl's head, crouching, green eyes narrow and sharp. The girl was gazing dreamily at the distant hills.

Then it sprang. Lightning quick! The air suddenly became filled with reeling, flying forms.

The terrified little horse screamed. A shot roared, and the pony lunged. Norma Lewis felt herself thrown spinning over her animal's head.

She landed in a heap against a great boulder and her senses began deserting her. A pungent odor permeated her consciousness, a decidedly unpleasant odor, it was. And then she lost all control of herself and everything went black.

"You feelin' better now, miss?" It was a quiet masculine voice, full of assurance and comfort, that brought her back to her senses.

Slowly, through the haze of her mind, a form took outline. She was lying in the shade of the boulder and a man was kneeling over her, fanning her face with his almost-white Stetson.

Norma opened one eye a little wider, then dared open the other and give the man more careful scrutiny.

He was slender, and his silk shirt was white, she noted. His eyes were gray, she decided. Then they seemed blue. At any rate, they were deep and, although he was young, they had tiny crows feet barely showing in the corners, indications that he had spent a lifetime out in the sun.

IT SEEMED comfortable, lying there and being fanned by such a stranger, but Norma made an effort to get up.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing much." His voice was deep and cool, like springs of fresh water under shady trees. "You almost had an accident. It's all over now. Feel better?" Norma sat up experimentally, then got to her feet.

"I don't think any bones are broken," she answered, examining a long scratch that could be seen on her arm through a rip in her sleeve.

She looked at her horse. The animal stood near-by, trembling. Several long welts and scratches were raised on his back. She stepped over to the animal and patted his head while she examined his wounds. Her face went white and she felt terribly weak.

"Panther?" she asked huskily.

"Yes, miss," the man replied. "He sprang from that boulder over your head. I got in a lucky shot just as he came sailing down on you."

Norma shivered.

"Ought to be careful while ridin'

these trails, miss. The painters are awfully hungry this spring. Been starving all winter, and now they're killing cattle and even full grown horses."

Norma looked about her but did not see the dead animal.

"Where is it?" she asked.

"Threw it behind the boulder," the man said. "Hoped you wouldn't see it. No use to upset you more."

"Thanks, but I'm not so easily upset. I've seen lots of them around here. May I see it?"

The man led her around the boulder and showed her the dead animal. Its wicked mouth was open, exposing needle-sharp teeth.

Its velvet-covered claws were slightly flecked with blood.

A bullet hole squarely behind the shoulder spoke eloquently of the accuracy of the stranger's aim.

Norma turned away with a shrug. "You didn't finish telling me all of what happened," she said to the man beside her.

"That was all. He just jumped and I just shot. When he landed on your horse he sunk his claws in and your pony did a song and dance and you landed on that stone."

SONG and dance, indeed! Norma smiled at the stranger's efforts to make his rescue sound so matter of fact.

"Oh, I see," she said mischievously. "It's as simple as all that."

The man made some kind of depreciating gesture with his hands.

"Well, even if saving girls from panthers is a simple, everyday occurrence with you, I ought to thank you for what you've done."

"It wasn't anything," the man assured her.

"All right, I'll take your word for it, Mr.—" she looked at him questioningly for a moment. Then to cover the silence she said, "I'm Norma Lewis." Another silence. "This is my father's place—Bob Lewis—"

The man seemed not to have noticed her hesitation when she expected him to give his name. Or, if he had noticed it, he choose to act as though he hadn't.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Lewis," he said. He spoke absently, looking off toward one of the valleys. Then after a moment he turned and eyed her frankly.

"You said something about thanking me," he said. "I reckon there is something you could do for me—that is, if you would."

SO he didn't intend to tell her his name. Norma bit her lips to hide her annoyance. But she answered. "Why, of course. Anything I could do—"

"Thanks a lot," the man answered quickly. "I hear some horses coming. There'll be friends of yours in the party. Now I'll just call this little incident square if you'll promise me not to say anything about it happening. Or if you have to, don't mention that you saw anybody. I'm sorry I can't explain right now. Is that a bargain?"

"Of course," the girl returned. "If you ask me not to—"

The man interrupted again. "Much obliged. And watch out for painters." And then as an afterthought, "—of all kinds."

Puzzled, Norma Lewis saw the stranger jam his hat on his head and disappear around the boulder, then a few moments later she heard the clump of galloping hooves, distinct at first, then growing fainter until there was nothing but silence.

The girl gave her attention to her horse, still wondering at the strange action of the stranger. She was examining the scratches on the animal when a party of three riders

appeared on the trail and brought their mounts up short.

The foremost rider in the party was her father's foreman, Bart Bradley. She had seen the other two working about the place.

"Howdy, Miss Lewis," Bradley said, easing himself across his saddle. "What's the trouble?"

HIS piercing black eyes roved over the girl's dusty clothes and came to rest on the bleeding hips of the pony. "Them's panther scratches, ain't they?"

"Yes," the girl answered reluctantly. Remembering her promise to the stranger, she tried to head off any more questions. "He jumped on Patch, but I shot him before he did much damage. Everything's all right now, thanks."

Bradley looked at the girl in a way that sent an uncomfortable shiver down her back. "You sure are lucky," he said, "and brave," he added patronizingly. "It ain't every girl brave enough to shoot a painter."

The girl mounted her horse, eager to be gone.

"Where's the animal?" Bradley asked her.

The girl nodded toward the boulder. "Behind there."

The two riders left the foreman and nosed their horses around the massive stone. Bradley, seemingly losing interest in the dead panther, eased his horse over beside the girl's animal.

"Miss Norma," he said. "Things has been pretty bad since you been on your trip back East. Cattle is disappearin' wholesale. Some was stole last night.

"And folks has been seein' a stranger, a puncher feller around lately. I'd advise you to kinda keep clear o' these here badlands. Cow hustlers kinda resents folks nosin' around where they're workin'."

Norma bit her lips, filled with resentment at the foreman for having said what he did, and a sense of guilt, as though she had been having an intrigue with a cattle thief. She felt as though she were caught in an illegal act.

"Why—I'm not afraid," she said lamely.

"No, I know you ain't," Bradley answered. "But you'd better stay away from this neck o' the woods." His eyes searched her face eagerly. "You ain't seen anybody around, have you?"

Norma Lewis looked off into the distance for a long moment. Then slowly she turned to her questioner.

"If I see any cattle thieves around I'll report it right away. Why do you ask?"

"Because we're out looking for him now. Somebody seen him headed this way, so we're makin' up a surprise necktie party for him."

"Oh." The girl looked queerly at her father's foreman, then quirted her horse and galloped off down the trail to the ranch house.

Bradley turned in his saddle and watched her until she was out of sight, and the light in his eyes would have made her very uncomfortable had she seen it. Then he joined the men who were still looking at the dead panther.

NORMA LEWIS prepared supper for her father with restless hands. This first night after her return from a winter spent with friends in Denver was turning out a failure.

Old Bob Lewis was so worried that he seemed not to realize that his daughter had returned. He sat at the table and ate quickly and silently while Norma sat across from him, uncomfortable and nervous.

Time and time again there came back to her the events of the after-

noon, the stranger who wouldn't tell his name, and who disappeared so abruptly the moment he knew that somebody was coming up the trail. And the foreman, a man her father had hired while she was away; the man's gaze had made her feel unclean.

Old Bob got up from the table and without a word buckled on his gun belt and joined his foreman and men out at the corral. From the kitchen door, Norma heard determined voices and the stamping of horses' feet.

Presently she heard them ride away into the darkness and she sat under a tree beside the house and waited. The hours stretched out slowly, as though the night would never end.

AFTER a while the moon came up, casting a feeble yellow light over the prairie and deepening the blackness in the hills where her father had gone with his men. And still time seemed endless.

Then, at last she heard hoofbeats, faint at first, then louder, until at last three horsemen dashed up to the corral and slid to a stop. The men were off their animals and stripping off their saddles to change them to fresh horses when Norma ran to them.

"Did you catch him — where's father?" she asked incoherently.

"Old Bob's shot, — he done it. We're gonna run him down."

"But where's father? Tell me what happened!" Norma demanded with increased excitement.

Bart Bradley took the girl gently by the arm and patted her back. "Don't worry. We'll find him."

A chill ran down Norma's back as the man's hand rested on her. "Please tell me what happened!" she repeated.

"I was just going to tell you," Bradley returned. "We was out hunting that man *you was talking to this afternoon.* We flushed him in that *malapais,* and in the chase we got separated. We heard a shot, an' yore dad didn't show up, so the rustler must have shot him. We're gonna find 'em both now."

NORMA'S fingernails dug into the palms of her hands.

"Have one of the man saddle Patch," she ordered.

"No!" Bradley said in a voice of authority. "You couldn't do no good."

"Don't tell me what to do," the girl said sharply. "I must find father. Please have my horse saddled."

Bradley was adamant. "No!" he said. "Your dad may be dead now and I'm in charge. It's too dangerous for you out there."

The foreman turned to one of his men and handed him a key. "Lock her saddle in the shed," he ordered. "And shake a leg; we gotta get goin'."

Then he turned to the girl. "You can just blame yourself if yore dad's dead," he shot at her. "If you hadn't lied to me out there today this might not have happened."

"I didn't tell you I was talking to anybody out there," Norma said lamely. She was humiliated that she had got herself into this unpleasant position. It seemed now that the man she had lied for had turned out a murderer as well as a cattle thief.

"Maybe not in them words, but there was a man there. He shot that painter."

"How do you know?"

"Because if you shot him, how come he was shot with a *forty-five* slug when your gun is a *thirty-two?* That little pistol of yours wouldn't kill a panther."

Anger surged up in the girl and, without answering the foreman's

accusation, she turned suddenly and ran toward the house. In the depths of her emotion she positively hated the thoughts of the man who had got her into all this trouble. "I hope they find him and hang him," she said between sobs.

EVEN as Bradley and his men rode off, she was getting into riding clothes and strapping her little gun about her waist. They were hardly out of sight when she was out to the corral throwing a bridle on her pony.

"Patch," she said, as she climbed up on a corral pole and mounted, "you have to show me the way to that stranger. I'm going to find him just as soon as I find dad."

The sure-footed little animal led her over the trail that she herself could hardly make out in the darkness. His mile-eating gait had brought her almost to the point of her afternoon's adventure when the horse stopped dead still and pricked up his ears.

Listening carefully the girl found the cause—another horse was whinnying off to the left, out of sight in the scrub pines and boulders.

The girl loosened the gun in her holster and turned her horse's nose toward the sound. Her heart pumped madly but she rode determinedly, no thought of panthers or other dangers besetting her.

And her valiant little animal, with unerring instinct led her through the treacherous badlands to a point where the moon shone down on a small clearing in the scrub. The black figure of a horse stood with drooping head near the shadow of a man who lay stretched out flat near the edge of the clearing.

The girl slid to the ground and was instantly beside the person lying on his back. It was old Bob Lewis.

He lay with one leg drawn up under him, twisted horribly. Blood soaked his shirt front. He was groaning weakly and his hands clutched at stray pebbles on the ground.

The girl's arm encircled his neck as she spoke, but the man was too weak to answer her. She tore off his shirt front and ripped it to pieces, binding the wound in his breast with the strips. She gently lifted his heavy weight and shifted his great body until she had his leg straightened out under him. This seemed to ease him somewhat and he regained a little control of his dissipated senses.

HIS eyes settled on his daughter and he seemed to recognize her. He lifted one hand and placed it feebly on his daughter's arm. He tried to say something.

"Can you tell me who shot you, Daddy?" she asked brokenly.

Her father looked at her with pain in his eyes and tried to speak, but his voice was inaudible.

A different voice came — unexpectedly—out of the dark.

"I think I can tell you, Miss."

The girl turned suddenly. Limmed in the moonlight was the stranger of the afternoon.

Norma caught her breath, hesitated for a moment, then her hand came up with her gun.

"Don't move—you murderer!"

The stranger paid not the least attention to her command, but dropped to his knees beside her father and inspected the bandages she had improvised.

"This won't stop the flow of blood," he said over his shoulder while his nimble hands stripped off the cloth and readjusted them. "How long has he been here?"

As he talked he took a flask of whisky from his pocket and poured a few drops between the lips of the

wounded man. "That ought to bring him around," he said.

The girl stood by, helpless and angry. She felt foolish standing with the gun in her hand and yet unable to use it on the man who was ministering to her father. And the stranger had knelt with his back to her as unconscious of her presence, apparently, as though she had been one of the boulders that loomed darkly around them.

The whisky showed signs of reviving the rancher, and the stranger seemed relieved. "Now," he asked, "can you tell us who shot you? I have an idea, but—"

Old Bob Lewis gazed at the stranger and didn't recognize him. "It must have been you," he said weakly.

THE girl heard the accusation with mixed disappointment and resolution.

While the man still had his back to her she raised her gun and aimed it squarely at him.

"Lift your hands straight up or I will kill you," she said in deadly earnestness.

The man turned and recognized the seriousness that was hers. He elevated his hands.

There was no longer the fleeting play of laughter in his face which she had noted during the day, but even in the feeble light of the crescent new moon she caught the bright sparkle in his eyes and the frank but respectful look he gave her. Pain shot through her but she kept to her resolution.

"Don't move," she commanded. "I'm going to get your gun, and if you make any movement I will shoot."

She took two steps toward the man and reached for his gun. He was still looking at her and she felt her eyes drawn to his, held there as though she were hypnotized by the serious depths of his.

Then the man slowly and deliberately lowered one hand and took her gun by the barrel.

"You'd better give me this," he said with gentle firmness. Before she knew it he had her weapon in his belt.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But there's too much to do and I can't let you interfere right now. Tell me all you know about what happened.

Something in his voice made the girl answer his question. It wasn't fear that the man inspired, but obedience. She told him what the foreman had told her.

"And wasn't your foreman here when you found your father?"

"Why, no. I haven't seen him since he rode off. I wonder—"

"I think I know the answer to that, too," the man said. "I have an idea they'll be along here pretty pronto now. Will you help me move your father—" He paused, listening intently.

The girl heard the faint sound of horses' hooves clattering on the stones. The man grasped her by the arm.

"Keep quiet," he whispered. "They will be looking for your dad, I've an idea. Come back here in the shadows—quick!"

WITHOUT waiting for an answer the stranger led the girl out of the moonlight and into the blackness of the scrub pines. He guided her to one of the upright boulders just as the riders came close enough for their conversation to be heard. She recognized Bart Bradley's voice.

"You sure you got him?" Bradley asked.

They were walking their horses and the girl had no difficulty in hearing them talk.

"Yeah," growled the second rider.

"I seen him fall when I potted him. He was right about here somewhere."

"I don't think we oughta done it," the third man offered. "There wasn't no use of it as I could see. I don't like this killin' business."

Bradley snarled his reply. "There was plenty o' use of it. He's been askin' me too many funny questions lately. Kinda gettin' suspicious o' our not bein' able to stop this leak in his herd."

THE man wasn't satisfied. "That don't make him havin' anything on us—just bein' suspicious. But killin'—now maybe we got our necks in a noose. Pottin' a man's different from just runnin' off some of his stock."

"Let up on that squawking," Bradley answered. "We got things cinched now." As the foreman spoke he pulled up his horse and the three men dismounted, preparatory to searching for Lewis' body.

"How?" the man continued.

"This strange hombre that's prowlin' these hills. The girl havin' seen him this afternoon, she'll have to swear he was skulkin' around. He's probably in here just to knock off a few head o' the old man's cows—which suits us perfect. We blame him with the killin', chase him down and hang him—and that's that. Whoa; here's the old coyote an' his horse." Norma shivered in revulsion at what she heard, and she leaned a little closer to the man who stood beside her. It was an unconscious gesture and the man took her arm reassuringly.

She felt his hand touch her arm and slide down to her own hand, then felt the smooth steel of her gun as he placed it in her hand. She felt new strength rush through her.

The man beside her was alert, silent, but she felt the taut movement of his body as he breathed evenly. He was crouched almost on tiptoe now as the three men approached the body of her father. Old Bob Lewis' life depended on whether the stranger could protect him from the group.

Bradley barked a curse. "Hell's bells! He's still alive an' somebody's done found him. Look at them bandages! Wonder if he's talked?"

The moonlight was just enough for Norma Lewis to see the indistinct form of the foreman as that worthy's right hand went for his gun, bent on making sure her father would not live to say any more. Her nerves were keyed up almost to the breaking point.

Near-by, the girl's pony whinnied, as though it were a warning. And that startling sound halted Bradley's gun-arm for a fraction of a moment.

In that split-second the man beside the girl acted. His gun roared and one of the three men fell across the body of her father.

The other two dropped low for the protection of darkness and scuffled toward the edge of the clearing.

THE stranger came out of the shadows with his gun belching orange streaks of fire. Bradley whipped a couple of answering shots at him and scuttled to the protection of a boulder, closely followed by the second man.

Norma's man followed them up, filling the night with the roar of his weapon, crouching forward as openly as though he were on a public street.

The little hollow rang with the bark of Colt-guns as the two men behind the rocks returned his fire. Orange stabs lit the clearing and the pungence of gunsmoke cut the nostrils. Horses neighed in frightened crescendo and clattered into the darkness.

The stranger barked an order. "Come out of there with your hands in the air," but he did not wait for the obedience he knew would not be forthcoming. A new volley of bullets answered him, and the roar echoed off into the hills.

The girl stood, half paralyzed, watching the flaming tableau before her. Then her eyes caught a new movement, the shadow of the man who had fallen wounded by her father. She saw the black silhouette of the man raise to one elbow and saw one arm extend with a gun pointing at the stranger's back.

She raised her gun in deliberate aim and squeezed the trigger. As her weapon barked a dagger of flame spouted from the fallen man's gun, and the man dropped down again with a convulsive shudder.

But his own weapon had found a mark. The man beside Norma spun around as the bullet caught him. His head jerked back and he toppled over forward.

Heedless of the foreman and his one man hidden behind boulders, the girl rushed forward to the man who was fighting for her.

SHE dropped to one knee beside him, answered a couple of shots with two from her own gun.

She became suddenly a thing transformed. A fierceness took possession of her and changed her from the civilized creature she had been to the primitive woman—fighting! Fighting with a woman's fury for those she loved!

She knew it now—as she must have known it since she had seen this man the first time. This was her man who had come to her!

The stranger saw her, lying on his back as he was, and he motioned for her to get back into the darkness. He was trying to get up onto his knees. "Get back," he shouted in a voice that did not conceal the pain he was suffering. "Quick."

THE girl ignored the command. Instead she helped him to a sitting posture and handed him his gun which had fallen in the dust.

The man snapped the trigger on a spent shell.

The girl took the weapon and handed him her own. She broke the heavy Colt and stuffed its cylinders with fresh cartridges from his gun belt. Then, while he fired at every intermittent flash from behind the rocks, she reloaded her own .32.

Crouched side by side, they settled down to a steady exchange of fire. Twice, then the third time, the man snapped his cylinder around while each time the girl refilled it. Then — there were only three more shells in his belt. Grimly she stuffed these into the gun and showed him the three empty chambers before she closed the breach. Then she started to crawl away.

On hands and knees she reached the body of the man who lay beside her father, and she unbuckled the cartridge belt from the dead man's waist and brought it and his gun back with her.

They had almost emptied the last gun when a sudden blaze of thunder roared from behind the rocks. The stranger yelled as though a bullet had ploughed through his heart. He started upward, then fell flat on the ground.

As he fell his flailing arms caught the girl and brought her down with him. Then he quickly placed his hand over her mouth, lest she should speak. Surprised, she lay without making a sound.

The trail that had echoed with the sound of battle now was silent as a tomb. The eerie light played on

the bodies stretched out among the rocks.

The girl lay, panting with the excitement, wondering. The seconds seemed like years. And as she looked up at the stars, fleeting glimpses of the last few hours raced across her mind. Her father, lying near her, dying perhaps. The stranger's unaccountable conduct.

Then she heard the soft crackle of a boot on a dried twig. It sounded with the sharpness of a rifle shot in the stillness, and it brought her back to reality.

Again the sound. And again. The foreman or his man was coming out from behind the boulder. Cautiously!

Three times more she heard the single step. But the man beside her did not move a muscle. He lay there, his hand clapped over her mouth.

By the sound of the footsteps she judged the action of the foreman. Warily he was coming out, believing that he had killed the stranger and the girl, but cautious nonetheless. More confident now, the man behind the boulder ventured out. No shots greeted him, and he grew bolder, his footsteps halting, light and alert.

Crash!

THE deafening explosion of a pistol almost beside her ear!

Over by the boulder she made out the dim form of the foreman, saw it reel and spin, then topple to the ground.

The body was hardly fallen before the stranger was on his feet, racing with drawn gun. It was the foreman; his man lay nearby with a bullet in his chest. Both men were helpless but still alive.

The stranger gathered up all the weapons in sight, then whistled for his horse. "We'll saddlebag these hombres across my animal's back," he said to the girl. "And make a travois to get your dad home."

While the man lashed his prisoners to his horse the girl worked over her father. The old man had fainted from loss of blood, but more liquor from the stranger's flask quickly brought him around.

"Now that you're feeling better," the stranger said when he saw old Lewis examining him through eyes whose brightness had returned. "Maybe I'd better introduce myself." The old man grunted.

I'M THAT range detective you asked the Association to send out about three months ago. We been so busy I couldn't get here any sooner. Been working down on the Rio."

The old man spoke. "You should have made yourself known. My foreman had us all gunning for you and from what I just been overhearing, they sure wanted you bad. And to think, Bradley and them two skunks of his was doing the stealing all the time."

"I don't usually make myself known until I get things straightened out. It makes things easier—" he looked at the girl—"that is, in most cases. Anyway, my name's Gooding—Phil Gooding. I'll present my credentials when we get you up to the house."

"You done presented them as far as I'm concerned—when you gunned out that sneakin' foreman o' mine. Norma, I want you to meet this feller—he's a range detective."

Gooding smiled at the girl. "Gooding's the name," he said. "Glad to know you, because I have a lot of things I want to say to you."

"Would it take long to say them?" Norma Lewis asked, looking at him squarely.

"Yes. A long, long time. Because I want to keep saying them over and over—and over and over!"

EAGLE EYES

A second later the runner had reached the steer

The Twins Were Such Dead Ringers Nobody Could Tell 'Em Apart—But Lizabeth Struck a Good Hunch in the Matter!

By RAY NAFZIGER

Author of "The Great Automatic Rodeo Cow," etc.

AT THE red mail box marking the entrance to the ranch of J. T. Cross, the big red roadster turned from the highway and shot across the cattle guard. The guard had been built too low and the car leaped into the air with enough force to throw the oldish driver and the dark-eyed young girl to the roof.

"Look at that!" roared the driver,

oldish J. T. Cross himself and in person. "An example, Lizabeth, how things is run while I'm away. They ain't bright, the cowboys nowadays ain't."

"Yes, J. T.," agreed Lizabeth as her grandfather nosed the car impetuously through the mesquite.

"Every spring I sashay back to Arizona I find this here cow outfit bogged down," Mr. Cross went on to complain. "No wonder it loses me money every year—with the cowboys dumb as they are nowadays. They ain't being e-liminated by the Apaches like in the days when I drifted into Arizona Territory. Then us cowboys had to be smart to keep Geronimo from jumpin' our withers!"

"Yes, grandpa," Lizabeth agreed again as the car darted past a forest of palm-like oose where blocky, cherry-red little calves lay snuggled, waiting the return of mothers who had wandered off for an hour's gossip at Ye Olde Water Tanke. No one ever disagreed with J. T. Cross; he was far too important.

A MILLIONAIRE, he owned one of the biggest cow outfits in Arizona, held interests in packing plants, sawmills, copper mines, and even in the picture industry, being a large stockholder in the Kurtz Super-Productions of Hollywood.

But the old J T ranch in Arizona was his chief pride, although now every year when he came back to it, it was to face heavy losses, for which the manager, Estey Bates, offered glib explanations.

It was this Estey Bates, tall, lean, handsome, who met them in front of the log-walled ranch house.

"Hello, J. T. Hello, Lizabeth," he greeted them while his fingers fiddled with the sharp-tipped ends of a handsome mustache. He was very courteous, Estey was, too courteous Lizabeth thought. "We've been expectin' you, J. T., but seein' Lizabeth is a unexpected pleasure."

"And I had the unexpected pleasure of bringin' her," snapped Mr. Cross. "Would you think a granddaughter of mine would go and git infatchated with a sheik of a loafing Hollywood moving picture actor that—"

NO calling names, J. T.!" Lizabeth spoke up spiritedly. She was a little thing, dark and big-eyed, but when those black eyes snapped, they added inches to her stature. "Bill Jessup was no Hollywood sheik—as you'd have realized if you'd ever seen him. He doubled in dangerous riding for Kit Fox and all the so-called Western he-men stars. I promised I'd come out for a stay on the ranch to try to forget him, didn't I? And I came, didn't I?" Her voice broke a little, and she went into the house, followed by the ancient Mexican Pasqual, carrying her bags. J. T. looked after her perturbed, his wrinkled face frowning.

"You and me, Estey," he said soberly to his manager, "we got to watch little Lizabeth to see she don't fall into no romantic tangles out on this ranch. She ain't quite over this attack of being stricken on this loafer in Hollywood and there's danger of a relapse in favor of some cowboy out here in this ranch atmosphere, with these ooses sproutin' white flowers under a full moon."

"It's hard to resist all them romantic dinguses," admitted Estey, and he smiled to himself and twisted his mustache again complacently. He was only in his late thirties, and luckily just now divorced. Marrying J. T. Cross's granddaughter would make him the owner of the J T ranch some day.

"We got to be on our guard," Mr. Cross continued, shedding his tweed coat and digging an old sombrero out of the car. "Who's ridin' here now that's liable to appeal to a fluffy brain girl with a busted heart? That Buck Haney, he's a lady killer."

WAS," said the manager. "A girl dropped her loop on him and married him, and he's got to travel fast to keep his side of the doubletrees from bumpin' his hocks. Right now the only young men on the payroll that might be dangerous is two twin brothers at the Bat Canyon camp. All the girls seem to think they're handsome. Alike as two peas. Can't be told apart."

"Impossible," snorted J. T. "No two people or cows or horses was ever exactly alike."

"Maybe not," conceded Estey. "But this Bill and Jim Beasley, we simply can't tell 'em apart. They dress alike and talk and eat and ride the same. If I ketch one on the loaf, I don't know if it's Bill or Jim I'm bawlin' out."

"Humph!" snorted J. T. "That shows the old eagle-eye breed of cowboy is gone. Disappeared with Geronimo. One glance and I bet I'd tell 'em apart."

"Don't bet too heavy on that," growled Estey. "Those boys is full of slick tricks. The crooks has made a lot of money bettin' us we could not tell which was which. Just last week I discovered one lisped when he said Mississippi and the other didn't. 'Mithithippi' the one that lisped, he'd say.

"It looked sure fire, until us boys pooled our money for a whoppin' big bet. Then we told them twins to say Mississippi and they both lithped—I mean lisped. Dang 'em, they're slick. And maybe in cahoots with rustlers shovin' off our range. If I had my way I'd fire 'em. You better do it before Lizabeth sees 'em."

I guess she wouldn't fall for no twin," remarked Mr. Cross. She's too smart to have a husband she couldn't tell if it was him or his brother."

They ought to be notched so they'd never fool nobody," said Estey savagely. "I told the boys we oughta slice a underbit on the left ear of one, a swallow fork on left ear t'other."

Mr. Cross looked at the manager searchingly. A hard streak in Estey Bates beneath the friendly surface sometimes reminded Mr. Cross of suave but crooked faro dealers.

Lizabeth had reappeared, dressed like a young forty-dollar-a-month cowboy, slim, unbelievably pretty in Levis, shirt and high-heeled boots, hair tucked under a sombrero of midnight shade. A granddaughter any Arizona cattle baron would be proud to claim.

I DIDN'T want to bring her out," J. T. muttered, freshly dismayed at his task of keeping so lovely a bundle of youth from the perilous influence of ooses blooming in Arizona moonlight. "I'm going right over to Bat Canyon and fire those twins. And any other handsome young squirts on this place."

"It'd be a wise move to fire that Jim and Bill," said Estey. "Only don't let 'em lure you into no bet that you can tell 'em apart. And, say. I a'most forgot: there's a stranger been stayin' over with 'em. A actor."

"Actor!" exploded his boss, thinking of Bill Jessup.

"A busted down string-halt sorta actor," explained Estey. "A old feller that drifted in a few weeks ago. Name's Earp. Sorta pathetic. Said he was studying for Western

roles in the movies and he wanted to learn real cowboy lingo and ways. Harmless and old, so I let him stay. He's been batchin' with the twins, cookin' for 'em and earnin' his board. He's even bought hisself a dogie calf to practice ropin' on."

The manager had neglected to mention one detail: that the old actor had given him fifty dollars for the privilege of staying at the Bat Canyon camp.

J. T. grunted sourly, and dismissing the painful subject of stage and movie people, drove off for Bat Canyon, Lizabeth by his side. On the way, chewing a cigar, he reflected that he might as well win a bet from the twins before he fired them.

"That would sure take Estey and the rest down a row of notches—me coming along and at a glance tellin' which of these twins is which," he reflected.

AT the Bat Canyon camp, they found the two young Beasley twins, picturesque and prosperous-looking in rainbow neckerchiefs, silver-studded chaps and the narrow-rimmed, flat-crowned sombreros of the brush country. They were roosting on a corral rail with two cigarettes held at exactly alike angles in exactly alike mouths of exactly alike faces.

Below them a gray-bearded man, with many wrinkled lines radiating from his eyes, and dressed in an outrageous fringed buckskin suit, was riding a paint horse about a pen. As he rode, he expertly swung a rope to let the loop fall on a racing calf.

Turning from the calf, the rider in the buckskin-fringed suit faced the arrivals and shaded his eyes Indian scout fashion with a hand encased in a gauntleted glove. In spite of his wrinkles and gray hair, he had a certain air of youth about him, as if his years had touched lightly.

HYAR thar, folks," he called in a squeaky voice. "Ain't yuh the old salt hoss," he addressed J. T., "thet's he'ped us shoot most partic'lar hell into them thar Apache varmints up Ringtail Crick back in '68 or '69, well's I kin recolleck?"

J. T. scowled. "Course not," he snapped. "How old you think I am? And who are you anyway?" He had forgotten what Estey had told him about the actor staying with the twins.

"My apologies, sir. My name is Earp, Jess Earp, pronounced 'Erp', and no relation to the Tombstone Earps," the stranger responded, switching abruptly from his old-timer dialect.

"And you are Mr. Cross, I presume? I will explain why I am here. I am an actor and a director friend of mine has promised me a chance at a role in a Western production. I make it a rule to always study my parts in real life. Your men have been kind enough to help me with many suggestions about the old Indian days."

"And what would the lunkheads know?" inquired Mr. Cross. "Geronimo would of scalped 'em all, if they'd lived in those times."

"My grandfather, Mr. Earp," cooed Lizabeth, "is the man you should have to coach you. He is an old Apache fighter and an authority on Arizona's Apache days. Twice he had the honor of being chased by Geronimo personally."

If Mr. J. T. Cross had been more on the alert he might have noticed a wink passing between Jess Earp and Lizabeth, a mischievous, youthful wink. But he was too busy just then in examining the twins perched

on the corral rail. A pair of handsome, blue-eyed, smart-alec cowboys, the kind that would attract girls. For Lizabeth's sake they'd have to be fired, but first he would show Estey Bates and the ranch crew the sharp eyes possessed by the ancient Arizona breed of cowman.

AS they continued to sit like two bronze statues, J. T. admitted they did look puzzlingly alike. Searching for identifying marks, he saw a tiny grease spot on the chaps of one, but that was a plain trap; they'd get rid of the grease spot if it came to a test: There were no wens, warts, carbuncles, boils, birthmarks, freckles or other blemishes on their persons. Spurs, boots, hats, shirts, neckerchiefs were identical.

J. T.'s gambling blood ran fast suddenly as his eagle eyes fastened on something. A microscopic cut in a boot heel, a mere glinting pin-point of fresh leather made by the slip of an axe. No one but an old Apache fighter, who could read an entire book from a single broken twig along a trail, would have noticed it.

"I've heard it said," he remarked, "that you two boys bet money nobody can tell you apart."

"Yes, sir," admitted the twin on the left. "That's right. But you've got to pick the same one of us five times straight so there won't be any chance of your just guessin' right. You put your identification marks on the back of our necks under our shirt collars. Then we'll walk behind that dobe wall and come out five times, and if you pick out the same one of us each time, you win."

"The boys warned us not to bet with you," remarked the other twin in his brother's voice. "They said it put you in a bad temper to lose a bet, Mr. Cross."

"Who, me?" demanded J. T. "Me, that's won and lost a thousand dollars on the turn of a card without blinking an eye? I'll bet you each a month's pay."

Mr. Cross unclipped his fountain pen and approached the twin with the nick in his heel. Pulling down the shirt collar a trifle, he handed the intrigued Lizabeth the pen and had her letter a neat numeral "I" on the skin. The cowboy blushed at the operation, and so did his brother as she put a "II" on his neck.

The two disappeared behind the corral wall. As they emerged a minute later, Mr. Cross's pair of eagle eyes dropped from their similarly creased hats to the right boot of one. Yes, there it was, the heel with the microscopic chip.

Triumphantly he glanced at the other cowboy—and received a shock. His right boot wore an identical mark! Too late J. T. Cross saw the trap. That chipped out place had been only a well-planned variation of the old army game of skinning suckers.

SWALLOWING his indignation, he stepped closer to examine them carefully. Lizabeth by his side, also studied the two with interest. Each time she came near them, they blushed like old-fashioned school girls. Evidently they were very shy.

"All right," J. T. guessed finally. "This is Number One," and he indicated the right hand twin.

Lizabeth's musical chuckle sounded behind him.

"You're wrong first crack, granddad!" she cried, and when he lifted the shirt collar, J. T. Cross realized that she was right. The neck bore a neatly-lettered "II." Not only had he lost the bet to the twins, but now he could not discharge them. It would look as if he had done it out of spite.

Lizabeth and the old actor went

back to the corral where the actor mounted his horse and continued his roping practice. Again and again he dropped his loop over the calf.

"He ropes as good as any cowboy," said Lizabeth. "Why, he could pass for an old-time cowboy anywhere now. Couldn't he, J. T.?"

"Huh! Anywhere except on a old-time cow ranch," said Mr. Cross grumpily and stalked into the pen to jerk viciously on the nearest leg of the old rider in the fringed buckskin suit.

"Hold your laig like it was a part o' your body and not a length of gas pipe," he ordered. "No Arizony old-timer ever rode like that."

"Those are just the things I want to learn, Mr. Cross," the rider said gratefully. "I want to be perfect."

Mr. Cross's hurt vanity was salved. "Crawl down off that broom-tail and I'll show you how I used to ride over these hills in Geronimo's time. Watch me! You'd do like this," he explained from the saddle, his eagle eyes flashing from north to south, from east to west. "And if you saw a Injun you'd grab your rifle and spring off, quick! Like this!"

As J. T. flung himself lightning-quick from the saddle, he happened to land on the rope which still had its loop on the calf. The dogie, lunging ahead, jerked the rope hard and the longlegged Mr. Cross described an ungraceful arc to alight gracefully on the back of his neck.

He got up jarred but unhurt, boiling internally, reflecting that the story of his unique descent on seeing Apaches would be retailed at many a roundup. "Let's go home!" he snapped, and strode to the car.

"That Mr. Earp does look really Western, doesn't he, grandpa?" Lizabeth said as the mesquite and oose sailed by.

"Who? That old fool? Look Western? Hah!" snorted J. T. "He couldn't fool Joe Kurtz even. Yes sir, even that ex-pants maker of a movie producer could tell he was a fake Westerner." Joe Kurtz, Hollywood's magnate specializing in million dollar super-productions, was a close friend of J. T. Cross, which however did not keep Mr. Cross from speaking frankly about his shortcomings.

BUT you will help him, won't you, Granddad," Lizabeth pleaded earnestly. "It's both pathetic and noble—his showing so much ambition at his advanced age. I'm sorry for him."

"I ain't," bellowed Mr. Cross. "I don't waste my time feeling sorry for no Hollywood actor." Then he softened: he'd have to be tactful. "I don't want to be mean, Lizabeth, but actors just ain't real folks. You forget about 'em now."

He remembered Lizabeth's laughter when he had chosen the wrong twin. That dark-eyed young minx had somehow known which was which. Craftily he decided to sound her out.

"I've heard women have a sharp eye," he remarked. "Much sharper than men."

"Of course they have, J. T.," the girl said with a sniff. "Men are all blind as bats."

"In some things, maybe," admitted Mr. Cross. "Now I was wondering how you told those twins apart so easy."

"Ah-ha!" chuckled Lizabeth. "You want to know so you can show how smart you are. And take advantage of those twins to win money from them?"

"Certainly not," J. T. defended himself. "I was just curious. Shucks, I'll find out my own way."

His granddaughter looked at him pityingly. "Maybe you will, in time. But any woman would be able to

tell those twins apart as quick and as simple as that." She snapped her fingers.

"Well, I think I was learning to tell 'em," said Mr. Cross, whereupon the chit tossed her head pertly and chuckled.

Her grandfather dropped the subject hastily. "You look real happy tonight, Lizabeth. You'll forget that Hollywood actor entirely out here on the ranch."

"He seems a long ways off," she murmured dreamily. "And this Jess Earp, compared with an actor like Mr. Jessup, seems a weak, aimless youth."

"You bet," J. T. agreed enthusiastically. "Why, when I come to think of it, I got to give this Earp bird a lot of credit—coming out to risk his life riding with real cowboys so's he can play a part. Yes sir, there's a real actor for you. You can't picture that Bill Jessup doing a thing like that."

"No, indeedy," said Lizabeth and suddenly stuffed a neckerchief into her mouth.

HOW much did yuh lose to them twins?" Estey Bates asked when J. T. had come to the ranch office to check over the books where the red ink showed painfully in the balances.

"Not half so much as that shell game pair is goin' to lose to me," predicted Mr. Cross. "And then I'll fire 'em. They're sure too handsome to be around Lizabeth."

"Better fire 'em right now and without showin' 'em up," advised Estey, who wanted no young rivals around. He would make Lizabeth fall in love with him and then run down to Nogales and cross the line into Mexico for a quick marriage.

He strolled into the living room to entertain Lizabeth, but she seemed in no mood to be entertained. However, Estey did his best with yarns of adventure in which he inevitably figured as hero.

He was not discouraged. The west side of the mountain round-up was to begin tomorrow and he decided to take personal charge and show her his importance by bawling orders at the men. And riding circle with the rest, he would amaze the girl by his reckless going down mountain slopes.

But it was J. T. Cross, not Estey Bates, who was to provide the thrills on the round-up. Perhaps J. T. realized he was getting old and had to show up the younger men. Or perhaps he was irritated by being unable to distinguish the twins apart, although he studied the puzzle from the time the two squatted on their heels to eat breakfast until they slipped under their tarps at night.

BUT there was simply nothing which an eye—eagle, telescopic, photographic, or microscopic—could fasten on. At any rate, his gallops at top speed through thick brush, down canyonsides, would have scared into convulsions the most daredevil of steeplechase riders.

The only man who even tried to keep up with the mad pace he set was the old character actor, Jess Earp. Earp, in explanation of his skill on the steep slopes, and in the brush, murmured apologetically that he had once done a bit of hunting. Which hunting all the cowboys agreed must have been after mountain goats in the topmost peaks of the Himalayas.

Estey Bates, failing to show himself a hero on round-up, waited for some other way to show it. Opportunity came in a lull in changing the cattle-gather from the west to the east side of the ranch, at the headquarters place on a rose-gold Arizona evening.

"If that feller ever got in a picture

he could give a real good imitation of a old-timer," J. T. admitted to Lizabeth as he saw Jess Earp helping the horse-breaker with a bunch of colts. "Ain't nothin' about a ranch he can't do. But that director friend of Earp's forgot long ago that promise to give him a chance. That's the way Hollywood is."

"Then why not write Joe Kurtz a letter to recommend the old fellow a part?" Lizabeth suggested. "The Kurtz Studios are going to make a talkie from the book 'Apache Nights,' and Mr. Earp would be wonderful in the part of the scout, 'Gila Bill' McKittrick."

"What makes you so interested in this old geezer?" J. T. asked, suddenly suspicious.

"I feel sorry for him," she explained sweetly. "And I also admire him. Let me write the letter to Kurtz."

The typewriter in the ranch office clicked away busily, and when she came out she handed him a sheet of paper. He saw that it was in the form of a telegram instead of a letter.

"JOSEPH KURTZ, KURTZ STUDIOS, HOLLYWOOD," it ran. "AS I HAVE TOLD YOU JOE AGAIN AND AGAIN I NEVER SAW A REAL ACTOR IN ANY WESTERN PICTURE THAT KNEW ENOUGH ABOUT THE WEST TO TAKE THE LID OFF A HOT DUTCH OVEN WITHOUT BURNING HIS FINGERS STOP BUT MR. JESS EARP NOW ON THIS RANCH IS ONE ACTOR THAT KNOWS HIS WEST STOP EVERY MOVE EVERY WORD RINGS TRUE STOP HE WOULD BE PERFECT IN THE GALA BILL MCKITTRICK ROLE AND IF YOU WILL GIVE HIM A TRY-OUT AND USE HIM I WILL PERSONALLY LEAD A PARADE OF FIVE HUNDRED COWBOYS AND FIFTY COVERED WAGONS UP HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD ON THE NIGHT OF THE PREMIERE OF THE PICTURE.—J. T. CROSS."

"Me in a cheap publicity stunt, eh?" burst out J. T. "Having a lot of half-wit rubbernecks gawking at me? Say, what's behind all this?"

"But, granddad," she wheedled, "you can't refuse to help out such a fine old man. Specially, when it will also please me. I've been a good girl, haven't I? I haven't flirted with a single cowboy, not even the handsome Beasley twins."

ALL right," he agreed. "I guess old Earp would of got by in Apache times. But only on one condition do I send this," he added doggedly. "That you give me your secret for telling those pesky twins apart. It's keepin' me awake nights. I've got to show these knothead cowboys of mine I've got a pair of sharp eyes."

Lizabeth's eyes danced. "It's hardly right that I should tell you," she said as she looked at the twins who were at that moment riding into the ranch, hazing a little bunch of cattle toward the corrals.

"It'll do 'em good to have their shell game busted up," pointed out Mr. Cross. "Them boys is liable to think they can git by on such cooked lays all their life."

"It's a bargain," she agreed. "You send this wire. I'll tell you the secret." She was suddenly radiantly happy. That telegram would get Jess Earp his chance, for J. T., besides owning a huge block of stock in the Kurtz corporation, was to the ex-pants presser, Joe Kurtz, the last authority on all things Western.

The Beasley twins quietly urged toward the corrals the little bunch of cattle, among them a huge, old, slab-sided steer, a descendant from a long line of wild and often fighting Sonora cattle. Hazed down from the high ridges where he had long lived the illicit life of a "cedar breaker," he was savagely "on the prod." Repeatedly he charged the horses of the twins.

Jess Earp had already crossed the

corrals while J. T. dashed over to help pen the animals. Lizabeth followed him.

"Shut that far gate!" he called to the actor, and "You put up those bars on the west side!" he ordered Lizabeth. He himself went to swing open the gate that would let the steer into one of the pens, slipping back out of reach of the sharp horns as the animal dashed madly through, far ahead of the rest of the bunch.

Perhaps the fifty years since he was last chased by Apaches had dulled Mr. Cross's mind or perhaps he was as always automatically hunting for differences in the twins as they sat their saddles. At any rate, not until the big long-horned steer thudded past, did he suddenly realize that he had turned the animal into the same pen with Lizabeth. By that time it was too late: the steer's wicked eyes had seen the girl and the big body was charging toward her.

A choked yell came from J. T. as he flew over the ground on a pair of legs that felt suddenly stiff and slow and old. What he prayed for in that desperate moment was to place himself in the animal's path, before it struck Lizabeth. While the sharp horns were occupied in putting a gory end to the career of J. T. Cross, the girl would be able to escape.

As he ran, shouting hoarsely, he was aware that another man was running toward the big animal on the same errand, at a much faster rate of speed. A second later this runner and the big steer came together. Hurled with terrific force against the poles of the corral, the man fell directly before the horns.

A furious thud of hoofs sounded behind J. T. and the twins sent two ropes whizzing through the air. Before the needle-tipped pikes of horns had touched the fallen man's chest, the lariats jerked them away.

He who had rushed so swiftly and bravely into a path where angels might well have feared to tread, was the ancient and hopeful old Hollywood actor, Jess Earp. Still and quiet, his body, covered with dust and blood, lay jammed against the corral poles. "Just a actor, a old Hollywood actor," J. T. muttered brokenly to himself as he stumbled toward the fallen man. "And now he's killed! Killed! Give his life for little Lizabeth."

Lizabeth darted in, a slim streak in man's overalls and shirt, to kneel swiftly and raise the head of Jess Earp. "He's dead!" she sobbed.

AS IF Lizabeth's tears had been a dash of reviving water, the closed eyes popped open and Jess Earp struggled to his feet. He stood unsteadily for a moment.

"I'm all right," he gasped. "Just got my wind knocked out of me."

While he stood smiling cheerfully the handsome manager, Estey Bates, red-faced with anger, rushed into the corral. Evidently he was laboring under the mistaken idea that Jess Earp had been responsible for the danger to Lizabeth.

"Your wind ain't goin' to be the only thing you'll get knocked out of you," he yelled. "Even a tenderfoot ought to of had more sense than turn that steer in the same pen with a girl. I'm goin' to beat you within a inch of your life."

"Hold on!" growled J. T. Cross. But Estey Bates had already rushed in. His arm flailed out to hit the oldish actor before the dazed Earp realized that he was being attacked.

"Cut it out, you Bates," roared J. T. Cross. "He didn't open that gate, and besides he's an old man. He saved her life."

Lizabeth grabbed her grandfather's arm to pull him back.

"For a long time Estey has wanted

to show himself to be a hero for my sake," she murmured. "Let him be it now—if he can."

Estey Bates to his surprise was having a lot of trouble being a hero. For the oldish actor Earp, after staggering back from the manager's first rain of blows, suddenly met the next rush with a pile-driver series of punches that, driving Estey far back, caused him to sit down suddenly in the corral dust, nursing a jaw which he believed had been broken.

STUNNED, he stared at Jess Earp, J. T. was also staring, stupefied by the realization that he had been sadly flimflammed. Under the dust and blood that covered the ancient actor was a young fellow. Those wrinkles had been false, as false as the little husky tremor of age he had used in speaking.

"Ah," J. T. breathed fiercely. "And so he's not an old man at all. A young man. And his name, I guess, is Jessup—Bill Jessup, instead of Jess Earp. Quite a joke that—Jessup and Jess Earp. Well, well, and I used to think I had a eagle eye. He must be a real actor."

Lizabeth nodded. "A wonderful actor, but they wouldn't give him a chance. They had him down for a stunt man, fit only to be double of some grinning ham of a cowboy star. We thought up the scheme of Bill coming out here to this ranch, just to get you to recommend him to Kurtz. Granddad, you'll still send that wire, won't you—and we—we want to be married."

It was inevitable that they would be married, J. T. knew that by the stubborn look in the dark eyes of Lizabeth and the determined look in the blue eyes of young Bill Jessup.

"If it was only somebody except a fool actor," protested J. T. Cross. "I seen many of 'em—they ain't real folks."

"He's right," agreed Bill Jessup firmly. "You're not going to marry an actor, Lizabeth. I don't want that chance to act for Kurtz, Mr. Cross. Instead, I'm going to ask you for the job of running this ranch."

"Takin' Estey's place?"

"Taking his place," said Bill Jessup gravely. "I've got on to some slick graft he's been pulling on this ranch—enough to put the profits in his pocket. I'll go into details with you later. I don't want a cent in salary until I make this ranch pay. And if I don't make good, I'll promise never to see you or your granddaughter again." Mr. Cross warmed at this speech, the lines were those that might have been spoken by a youngster of the old-time days of the Apache in the West.

"All right," he said resignedly. "I'll try to get your mother to agree to a wedding, Lizabeth, when he makes good. But it'll be a scrap and I fight only for you on condition you tell me how you tell these twins apart. You tell me right now or I'll chase this Bill Jessup of yours right off the ranch."

LIZABETH leaned over to put her lips close to J. T.'s ear.

"This is my system for telling those twins apart," she whispered. "It's in the way they blush. The Jim twin blushes all over his face and up to his ears, but the Bill twin he blushes over his face and his ears, too. Now, isn't that simple?"

"Ye-es," grunted J. T. "But how can you make 'em blush?"

"That's up to you," said Lizabeth. "All any girl would have to do is look them straight in the eye and they blush. They're awful shy. And now Bill and I are going down to have his chest looked over by the doctor. Bill's the kind that would claim he wasn't hurt when he had a chest full of broken ribs."

Branding Fire Song Book

By "TEX" GAINESVILLE

FOLKS, things sure is a-boomin'. The editor come a-rushing in with a bright idea that he'd got a toe-hold on. He laid it down so's I could see the brand on its side. And sure 'nough, it was a real *hot tamale.*

He says, "Tex, whatever become o' that old noise maker o' yours that you used to try to kid us was a guitar? You know, the one that you had branded all over with the brands o' the outfits you an' me used to ride for?"

"I still got it," I tells him.

"Then how about some o' them old almost forgotten range songs you used to sit on a wagon tongue and bang out? You ain't traded them for jazz stuff, have you?"

Songs That Soothed the Cattle

"You mean the ones us cowpokes used to sing to the gals on them clear, moonlit nights and then later sing to the cattle on stormy nights to soothe them an' keep 'em from stampedin'?"

"Them's the ones," the editor says. "You know somebody ought to preserve them ditties, and that someone ought to be you."

It sounded to me like he'd heard a song about "someone ought to be you," or something like that, but I didn't take no offense, knowin' how he falls for music of all kinds. So I says, "all right, hombre, what you want me to do about it?" He says for me to git over to that writing machine and start banging 'em out on paper, so posterity kin have them.

Posterity's Just Around the Corner

I told him that I'd just walk around the corner and hand 'em to posterity, because I'd heard somebody say that posterity was just around the corner.

He pipes up and says for me to quit thinking my name's Will Rogers and write the song. So, seeing he didn't appreciate my fancy sense of humor, there was nothing left for me to do but start wrestling with the typewriter. So here's the first song.

One of the Best Old Tunes

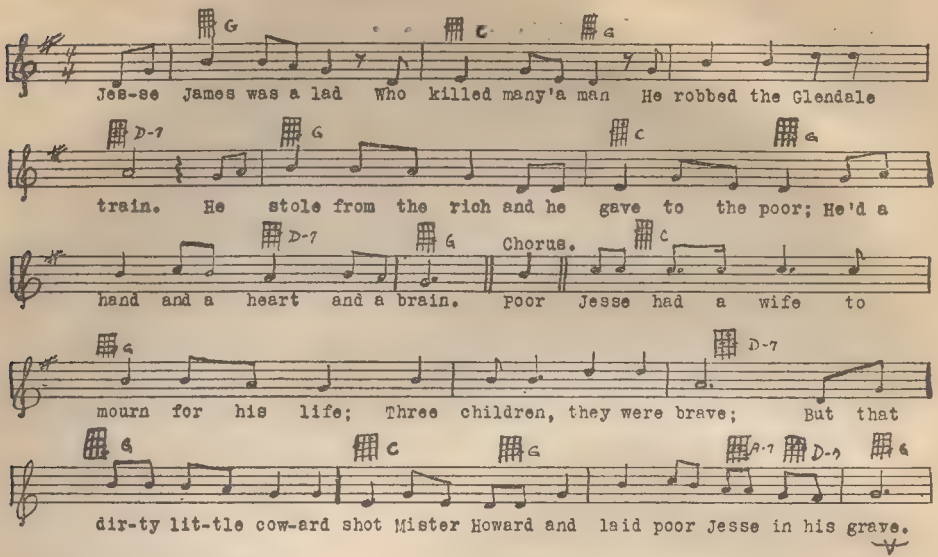
It's one of the oldest and at the same time the most popular tune that a cow ever had sung to her. Everybody knows Jesse James, and how everybody liked him. He was the American Robin Hood. When he was living peaceably in town he went under the name of Mr. Howard, and he was mighty popular because, like the song says, he took from the rich and gave to the poor.

There's a dozen other verses and versions. But these we print this month tell the whole story of the man whose name everybody will remember.

And we'll give you another famous old song here in the next issue.

I've tried to write the music so you kin see how the tune goes, and also indicate the chords for the guitar or uke. So tune up your old music box and let 'er hum.

JESSE JAMES



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2

It was Robert Ford, that dirty little coward
I wonder how he does feel,
For he ate of Jesse's bread and he slept in Jesse's bed
Then laid poor Jesse in his grave.

Refrain.

3

Jesse was a man, a friend to the poor,
He'd never see a man suffer pain;
And with his brother Frank, he robbed the Chicago bank,
And stopped the Glendale train.

Refrain.

4

It was on Saturday night when Jesse was at home
Talking with his family brave;
Robert Ford came along like a thief in the night
And laid poor Jesse in his grave.

Refrain.

5

The people held their breath when they heard of Jesse's death
And wondered how he ever came to die.
It was one of the gang called little Robert Ford,
He had shot poor Jesse on the sly.

Refrain.

The New Puncher

"No tricks, Sheriff! Or I'll shore drill yuh!"

Janice Barkley Resented the Floatin' Waddy's Bet That He Could Make Her Love Him—So She Hired Him on Her Star Cross Ranch

By LAWRENCE A. KEATING

Author of "Marion's Option," "The King of Golden Valley," etc.

EAVESDROPPING was farthest from Janice Barkley's mind as she rounded the blunt end of the bunkhouse on the Star Cross Ranch she rented from the Lennington estate. She had only in mind to discuss with Nick Greer, her foreman, the dryness of Arrow Creek, and the fact that the single well on her modest spread threatened to give out in another week if the prolonged drought continued.

But just outside the dark opening of the punchers' quarters Janice paused, struck with men's voices on a rather peculiar subject to crop up in conversation.

"Yeah," came the throaty tones of her foreman, "I've seen lots o' hombres ride up here an' ask for a job, plannin' to get personal with the purtiest ranch boss in Pioneer County. But they didn't last long, Masters. She ain't uppity none, but Janice Barkley shore knows her own mind. An' no floatin' waddy drops his rope on *her*, you bet!"

A tolerant chuckle answered him, and the girl heard a strange voice, obviously young. "Prob'ly they didn't understand women, Greer. If I was around here a couple o' weeks," the newcomer declared, "I could get her pinin' for me no matter how purty she is nor how uppity or anythin' else. All that's needed is experience. Work slow and careful and yuh'll have her eatin' out o' yore hand. Any woman!"

HUH!" Nick cleared his throat with a great rasping sound. "Think yo're the Great Lover or somethin', do yuh?"

"Oh, no," the man returned modestly. "But I figure this Barkley gal can be won, same as any other. Now, if you'd care to make a little bet on it, say fifty bucks—"

"It'd be a shame to take yore money," the Star Cross foreman declared promptly. "An' look here: yuh'd have to work for her to do yore act. I dunno if Janice'd hire yuh."

"Prob'ly she would if yuh put in a word for me. Any woman," the stranger explained with confidence, "can be won if she's handled right. I'd sort of like to try my luck, because I've heard this Janice Barkley is quite a beauty, and an awful nice gal besides."

There was a short silence. "Yuh really want to bet?" Nick questioned somewhat doubtfully. "I thought all along we was jokin'. 'Course, I won't back out, but it's got to be understood yuh can't make Janice feel bad. I'm plumb fond of the gal, like she was my own daughter. I'd rather lose a finger than see a tear in them dark eyes o' hers."

The stranger chuckled again. "I'm bettin' fifty bucks I can get her to like me. I ain't so low down as to hurt any feelin's, so don't worry none. Here's my fifty, Greer."

Nick seemed to hesitate. "We'll each keep our money so the secret don't get out. But, remember," he warned soberly, "I won't see that gal's heart busted, nor her feelin's hurt. Dang it, I—I shouldn't've got into this, but now I'm in, I'll see it through. I'm fast on drawin' a gun sometimes," Greer remarked casually.

Outside the bunkhouse the girl in worn Stetson, deep wine-colored blouse, buckskin riding skirt and boots, stood tense. On her tanned, winsome features was written puzzled amazement. Why—why, the conceit of this stranger! To think he could ride onto her spread, get a job, and—and win her!

Janice Barkley straightened her tall, slimly molded figure and threw her shoulders back. Her hazel eyes glinted, and there was an unmistakable setting of her firm chin. Of course she would give no job to this man who regarded himself as invincible, irresistible—who could win any girl he wished!

JANICE stepped toward the bunkhouse door to deliver a tart lecture Nick Greer's visitor would not soon forget. But the unexpected approach of booted feet made her halt. Her heart skipped a beat, and

stark panic gripped the girl. Turning suddenly, she fled around the corner of the lop-and-clapboard structure for the haven of the ranch house stoop.

"Hey, Janice! Can I talk with yuh a minute?"

Pausing, the brown-haired girl looked back. Greer and a tall, well-built young man were nearing. Janice poised indecisively, then waited, gripped with a queer lost feeling.

"This here's Cal Masters." The foreman gestured to his companion. "Seems like we could use another hand, bein' as the steers are gettin' a little restless under short water rations. So if yuh think so," Nick ended in a tone that betrayed his smarting conscience, "why, uh, maybe yuh'd want to hire Cal."

HOWDY, Ma'am." Masters removed his roll-brimmed sombrero and smiled with flashing even white teeth. Athletic of build, he possessed a sort of winning, lazily confident manner. His eyes were friendly and gray. He wore a denim shirt, corduroy trousers, red bandana, wide cartridge belt supporting a bone-handled six-gun. Large-wheeled spurs on his riding boots were the only ornamental feature of the man's dress.

"—so if yuh need a hand, I'd shore like the job."

Abruptly Janice realized that he had been talking. Swift remembrance came of the conversation she had chanced to overhear, and a flush mounted her smooth cheeks, healthily coated by days in the sun.

Then something happened that the Star Cross mistress could not explain. She had meant to dismiss him with cool, telling phrases. But a certain indignation gripped her at his vast conceit. He could win her affection, could he?

"Yes," she informed Masters calmly, "we can use you. I pay forty-five a month, and supply everything."

She started to turn away, but paused. "Nick, let Masters find a hammer and staples and pliers. That fence in the east draw needs attention."

Greer started. "But gosh, Janice! Cal's an experienced hand. I—uh—"

She shrugged her trim shoulders. "The fence must be repaired."

The foreman looked at Masters to find the man's face immobile. Frowning, he turned and strode for the corral. An instant the stranger and ranch mistress faced each other; then Janice indicated the tool shed. "Just mend anything that needs it. I'll ride out presently to see how you get along."

Then she turned on her heel and went to the ranchhouse stoop, where she stood in the shade, covertly watching him saddle a stallion and ride away. The ghost of a challenging, triumphant smile tugged at the corners of her alluring mouth, and Janice Barkley nodded. That would show Mr. Cal Masters how easily she succumbed to his charms!

"Hullo, Janice! How's the little gal rancher today?"

TURNING in quick surprise, she saw Arnie Pilson striding from the dusty main road where waited his spring wagon team of grays. Owner of the Circle 20, south of her Star Cross, the man possessed wide shoulders, a squat, powerful physique, and sharp eyes that roved now in frank appreciation over the nineteen-year-old ranch mistress. Pilson's florid and rather truculent features were drawn in what he meant to be an ingratiating grin.

Janice felt no pleasure at his coming. Recently Pilson had shown more than casual, neighborly inter-

est in her, and she had no desire to encourage him. He was fifteen years older than she, and there was talk of his having a shady past—although, of course, that may have been unfair, malicious gossip.

"Yo're purtier every day, Janice." Pilson stood grinning at his own ponderous tribute, almost as if he expected a reply in kind.

"Thank you, Arnie." A frown crossed her satiny forehead as the girl sought a less personal topic. "It's—it's awfully dry, isn't it? I'm really worried about the drought."

He leaned against a corner roof support. "Yeah," Pilson observed, "an' weather reports say there ain't even a drop o' rain in sight."

A LITTLE gasp of worry and dismay escaped the curving carmine of her lips. "I don't know how I'll get along, then. I haven't water enough for more than a week. I wrote the executor of the Lennington estate, asking him to finance a new well, but I've had no reply."

She stared downward to hide the quivering of her under lip. Arnie Pilson ventured a stubby hand on her exposed forearm. "Yeah, those guys are tight. Own a third o' the county, but they won't help none o' their renters till young Lennington's found. It all goes to him, and I expect he's like a lot o' rich hombres. Prob'ly throwin' money away in New York or somewheres, while honest cattle-folks have a tough time to get along.

"But, say, Janice," he added, and rubbed his large nose. "Maybe you an' me—"

Arnie stopped, scowling as Cal Masters swung from his stallion. In one hand he held his sombrero, and outstretched in the other was a white envelope.

"R. F. D. man brought this for yuh, Janice."

"Oh, yes. Thank you, Cal." She accepted the letter, her pulse speeding as she saw that it was from H. D. Simms, executor of the Lennington estate. "Pardon me a moment, Arnie," she requested, and slit the envelope. "Oh, Cal, you may as well go out to the draw now."

"Shore, Janice, I will." He started for his horse and the girl, hopefully scanning her letter, did not notice the men's eyes meeting, nor see Pilson's hostile, suspicious stare at the puncher's retreating back.

"Yuh look disappointed," Arnie said with concern, noting the contraction of her silken brows and the girl's eyes lowering.

She did not reply for a moment. "Yes," Janice said heavily. "The Lennington estate refuses to dig a well, no matter how badly I need it. They won't do a thing until young Robert Lennington is found, and the estate turned over to him."

Arnie Pilson nodded. "Gosh, that's shore too bad! But, say, Janice," he went on, eyeing the girl speculatively, "there's still a way out, yuh know."

She raised her eyes to his, but dropped them again and swallowed hard. "I—I'm afraid not. This means ruin."

"Why, no it don't!" His palm covered her shapely hand. "Look here," Arnie said persuasively, "I got the Yucca River on my spread, and it always seemed like a good idea if we—wal, if our ranches would be combined into one.

I MEAN," he hurried on, "I been kinda lonesome since Susie died. I like a woman around the house to run things. Say," he ended awkwardly, "will yuh marry me? That'd be a way out o' all yore trouble, and I shore would like it!"

Janice started, groping for an

evasive answer. "Th—thank you, Arnie, but I hardly think our ages—"

"Aw, I could take care of yuh better'n some young hombre. Bein' married before, I'd know what's best for yuh, an'—an' all that."

He waited, his eyes fixed with compelling eagerness on her oval countenance. At last, frowning troubledly, Janice looked at him. "You must let me think it over," she said slowly, striving not to hurt his feelings, yet to avoid promising. "Let me think it over a few days, Arnie."

SHORE, do that. I'll ride over some evenin'. I'll shore be proud, Janice," he ended expectantly. "By the way, who was the hombre that brought yore letter?"

"Oh, Cal Masters. He's a new puncher here."

Pilson fingered his square chin. "He don't look any too honest. I'd get rid o' that feller. Wal," Pilson finished, and started toward his team of grays, "so-long, Janice. Shore hope yuh decide to turn yore worries over to me! Yuh know, ranchin's a man job, anyhow."

She tripped quickly inside the ranchhouse until he was gone. But keen disappointment at the Lennington letter made her restless, and she paced up and down the cheery, neatly furnished living room. The drought problem was serious. It was really menacing! And Arnie Pilson's offer of a way out—well, she wished fervently that he had not uttered it. For he was the only rancher hereabouts who could possibly spare a few tankfuls of water. And now, with their relationship on an intimately personal plane, she could scarcely mention borrowing water unless she accepted him.

On impulse Janice Barkley determined to ride out to see how Cal Masters progressed. If repairing fences did not put the man in his place, she could find many another menial task. She would show him whether he could win her affections so easily!

Anticipation kept a secretive smile on the girl's face as she rode to the east draw. Intent upon his work, Cal did not glance up until she drew rein and dismounted. "How are you getting on?" she inquired sweetly.

"Purty good." He started toward a post to retrieve a small object mounted there.

But Janice indicated a spot behind him. "Better start on that place where the three strands are down."

Masters' eyes met hers and he hesitated. The mounting respect she read was like a tonic, the way it brought confidence. When his back was turned, Janice stepped quickly to the post for the bit of pasteboard stuck there.

She stared, wide-eyed. A snapshot of herself! "Of all the nerve—" She checked the exclamation and sent him a sharp look. It was on the tip of her tongue to demand where he had got the picture. The impudence! The—the—

CALMLY, deliberately, and with a sort of diabolical thrill, Janice tore the snapshot into two, into four, into eight small bits. She approached Masters, letting the pieces dribble from her fingers, but saying nothing. A moment she watched his work, then touched a staple he had driven.

"Crooked," she accused. "A man who can't even mend fences hardly will prove useful on the Star Cross. This job could be worse," she conceded as if wanting to be fair, "but it looks like the work of an Agricultural College rancher."

The man's range-weathered cheeks flushed to the dark wine color of

Janice Barkley's blouse. "Agricultural College courses are all right," Masters defended. "Yuh got to blame their students if there's blame coming."

"Oh! Then you are a graduate?"

Hammering home a staple, he glanced at her. "We had a good course in waterin' stock, anyway."

Janice stiffened. "Then please explain how I might water mine when there is no water?"

"Wells! More wells, deeper wells. There's good clear water under this ground."

YES, and lots of good hard money in the Lennington estate that I rent from. But try to persuade that money out of the estate!" she said somewhat bitterly. "Simms, the executor, is holding every cent for dear young Mr. Lennington. I suppose he's a waster like so many rich men's sons. Probably throwing hatfuls of money away while his unfortunate tenants lie awake nights, trying to evade ruin."

Masters straightened interestedly. "Yuh mean they won't sink a well for yuh?"

"I mean exactly that. Here that good-for-nothing son has more than he knows how to handle, and I face bankruptcy just because he hasn't been heard from since November. Until he is found, Simms won't lift a hand. I'd like to meet that rascally ne'er-do-well," she went on angrily. "I could tell him a thing or two!"

Masters fingered his chin. "Wal, now, maybe he ain't so bad." He eyed the bits of snapshot strewn behind her. "Might be if he could marry some nice gal he'd be glad to turn over a new leaf."

She started away. "I think you had better go back to work, Cal. I'll need you to rustle firewood this afternoon."

"Shore glad to do it, Janice."

Her lips parted to remind him distantly that she was *Miss* Janice. Still, everyone called her Janice. She would have to allow him that privilege, too.

During the next several days the new waddy cheerfully performed menial tasks that would have prompted many a puncher to quit. But Cal never showed resentment; he was actually pleased by her every order. Nick Greer overheard her instruct Masters to mend harness, and stood rubbing his jaw reflectively. "Say, Janice," he ventured, "that boy throws a rope better'n Pete Wendle or Socks Ingram."

She fitted the worn Stetson over her mass of glowing brown hair and shrugged slim shoulders. "These jobs have to be done, Nick."

That evening she saw Arnie Pilson coming for his answer. But she scarcely knew what to say! She needed his aid, desperately. But marriage for safety or convenience seemed cowardly, odious. She had always wanted marriage for love.

Chancing to look at the floor of the low-roofed stoop, Janice saw a small package lying a few feet away. She went to it and opened it with curiosity. Of a sudden the girl stiffened, and a startled, incredulous gasp left her lips. For there, in the bit of brown paper she had unwrapped, lay a bundle of banknotes—two thousand dollars!

SHE found a note, written in a neat, even hand:

Please regard this as a loan to be used in completing the well your ranch needs. I would like to see your spread saved. There is no obligation.

C. M.

P. S.—I came by this money honestly.

Why, "C. M." was Cal Masters!

Before Janice recovered from her amazement Arnie Pilson greeted her. She invited him to be seated, and for a few minutes they spoke of the drought and of various ranching matters. At last Arnie leaned forward. "Well?" he said hopefully, "I hope yuh decided yes, Janice?"

SHE longed to be far away, or to have the painful scene finished. "I'm afraid I don't—love you, Arnie. I'm sorry."

"But yuh could learn to! I'm really a good feller when yuh get to know me. Besides," the man hurried on, "yore troubles'd be over—no more worries about this dry spell. Anyhow, ranchin's a man's job. Wimin always go busted, sooner or later."

Her chin lifted sharply. "Oh, do they?"

"Shore! C'mon, Janice, yo're a smart gal an' know a good thing when yuh see it. Yuh'll do it?"

She gazed at him. Why were men so superior? What made them think women should leap willingly, eagerly, at the crook of a finger? A certain puncher had wagered he could gain her affection—that was bad enough. But to top it, Arnie Pilson, of all men, thought he could *buy* her!

"My answer is no," she stated hotly. "I—I think there is nothing more to be said."

Pilson rose, his tensity showing angry resentment. "So yuh think beggars can be choosers, do yuh? Wal, yuh'll find out. Remember one thing," he warned, his pudgy finger shaking close to her nose, "I won't give yuh a drop of water. I'll let yore cows lay down an' die first!"

She trembled so that she could scarcely speak. But the girl waved her packet of two thousand dollars under his chin, and her eyes blazed through the evening gloom. "I'll get along very well without you!" Janice cried. "You want a—a washwoman, not a wife! Oh, I do wish you would leave and never, never come back here!"

A low rumbling started in his chest and for an instant she thought the man would crush her into his arms by sheer superior strength. But Pilson turned glowering away. And while she still fought to calm herself, he rode into the slow-spreading moonlight.

Janice walked slowly toward the corral and saddled Nellie, her mare. With cool night air laving her hot face and neck, she rode at a swift trot over crisp, dry bunch grass. She proceeded for some time quite aimlessly, until a shout made her look up. In surprise Janice realized she had ridden two miles to where Cal Masters had the remuda roaming the stone-spattered sides of Yellow Gulch.

"Wal!" he greeted, riding forward. "I didn't know it was you, Janice. Thought it was Nick Greer come out about a bet we—"

He stopped in confusion. "A bet? What about?" she pressed.

Masters scowled in the shadow of his sombrero brim and fumbled for cigarette makings. "Oh, he likes to rag me about a little thing—don't amount to much. Say," he said, changing the subject, "do yuh like to dance, Janice?"

"Yes!" she breathed at once. "I love it. But I—I don't very often have the chance. There aren't many dances hereabouts."

NO. That's why the one tomorrow night at the District School—I thought maybe I'd go if yuh could let me off."

The girl's conscience smote her. Piqued by his bet with Greer, she had worked Cal long hours, put him

on many a job beneath his real ability. "Certainly you may go," she decided at once.

The youth looked quizzical. "Don't suppose yuh'd like to take in that dance? With me?"

She wet her red lips eagerly, wanting to nod.

But recalling his boast to Greer, she checked herself. "N—no, I hadn't better."

MASTERS looked crestfallen. "That Pilson hombre coming, eh?"

Janice alighted to pick up a leather cuff she had dropped on the side of her mare away from him. "Have you any objection?" She placed a boot toe in one stirrup preparatory to mounting.

"I shore have!" came the prompt reply. "I'm plumb afraid he'll talk yuh into marryin' him. I don't trust that rooster farther'n I can see him, either!"

The words came with such impulsive vehemence that Janice Barkley poised with one foot still on the ground, ready to swing astride. "Wh-why!" she gasped. "You—you have no right to say that! You have no right!"

"Yuh know very well I have," he declared in a low, vibrant tone. "Yuh know yuh like me better'n yuh like Arnie Pilson, Janice!"

The startled tremor over her slender body swung her spur against the mare. Always skittish, it danced away, collided with the stallion Cal bestrode, and kept sidling from the girl. She hopped desperately on one foot, striving to regain her grip on the saddle horn to swing herself upward.

But suddenly Janice lost balance. "*Oh!*" Her startled cry changed apprehension to fear. The mare broke into a run. Hurled backward at the jerk, her shoulders struck the earth with force that rendered the girl helpless.

Masters wheeled his stallion and pressed after. Leaning low, he accustomed his mount to the balance before he drew alongside Janice Barkley. Suddenly he swooped, thrust his hand under the neck of the dragging girl, and slid his arm around her shoulders. The wriggling motion as he lifted released her boot—and an instant later he had constricted every sinew to draw erect with his employer before him on his slowing mount.

"Janice!" Cal Masters caught the girl's limp form close, peering into her wan and dust-streaked countenance. "Justice! Oh, gosh!" he exclaimed worriedly. "She's hurt—*bad!*"

AND the next she knew, morning sun poured its brilliance through the ranchhouse windows, covering the bed on which the Star Cross mistress lay. Janice Barkley stirred, and discovered herself fully clothed, lying under a soft comforter. Her eyes smarted, but she made out a haggard and wan Cal Masters at the doorway, heard him speak in a low tone. "Nick, I'm half-crazy. She hasn't waked up yet."

"Yes, I have."

He turned. "Gosh! How do yuh feel, Janice?"

"Why, all right. But I'm so bandaged up! Stitches?"

He nodded, and raised seven fingers. The girl looked surprised, but summoned a plucky smile. "Cal," she said presently, "if you will step into the next room and see that I get some breakfast, why I think I shall get up and come there to sit."

He started to protest, but she waved mocking dismissal. "All right," Masters yielded. "Take it easy, though. An' head right for the big chair!"

She was comfortably installed, eating breakfast, when her grizzled foreman stepped to a window. "Say!" he exclaimed. "Here comes Sheriff Ben Stearns and another guy!"

And it was. Gruff, business-like Stearns strode into the room, followed by a nervous little man in city clothes whose glasses hung on a black ribbon, and who carried a brief case. "Howdy, Janice. Yuh get bunged up?"

"Just a little," she returned smilingly. "What can I do for you, Sheriff?"

He sent a keen, probing look around. "Got a ranny by the name o' Masters workin' on yore place, ain't yuh, Janice?"

BEFORE she could speak Cal reentered the room with a potful of coffee. At the sight of the newcomers he halted, disgust and irritation in his look. "Howdy, Simms." Then Masters poured a fresh cup of steaming brew for the girl.

The fussy little man rested his brief case on a table and looked from Cal to the girl. "Your wife?" he suggested.

Masters did not even turn around. "Not yet. Comfortable, Janice?"

The girl's reaction to his audacity was lost in curiosity at the stranger's business. "Hmm." He cleared his throat. "We had a difficult time locating you, Bob."

"Bob?" Janice Barkley echoed, while Nick Greer looked on in equal puzzlement. "Is your name Bob?"

Sheriff Stearns rocked heel-and-toe, his thumbs in the armholes of his vest. "Yeah, I recognized him for a wanted man, Janice, when I rode across yore spread two days ago."

"*Wanted!*" Dismay swept over her piquant face.

Mr. Simms smiled his thin, indulgent smile. "Wanted for a good purpose, Miss Barkley. Now, Bob," he proceeded smoothly, and drew a thick wallet from his pocket, "I brought a little cash, thinking you would want to—er—purchase a suitable outfit for your trip back to Kansas City."

"I'm not going to Kansas City."

"Not goin? But—"

"Up with yore hands, folks! *Up* with 'em!"

Sheriff Stearns whipped at his .45 butt. *Crash!* A bullet sprang from the black muzzle of a six-gun held by a masked man in the doorway. It sent the lawman's headgear sailing to Janice's feet. "No tricks, Sheriff! Or I'll shore drill yuh!"

Simms, Cal Masters, Greer and the official stood rigid. "I'll get yuh for this, yuh dirty skunk!" roared Stearns. "I'll hound yuh until I—"

"Stow it!" The holdup glanced sharply at Simms. "Hand over yore wallet!"

The man complied, his hand trembling while he eyed the Colt .45. The bandit stuffed it inside his shirt and retreated toward the door.

"Thought yuh'd nab me, huh, Masters? Wal, I recognized yuh for what yuh are—a damned express dick! An' cuttin' me out with the gal didn't help yuh none. I'd got her if yuh hadn't showed up, yuh lousy pack-rat!"

THE youth measured his man with cool, alert eyes. "Pilson's real name, folks, is Hank Jastrow. Pulled a big express robbery in New Mexico three years ago. Killed two detectives. Hank," he declared steadily, "yuh better give yoreself up an' save trouble!"

For answer the man's trigger finger tightened. "I'll kill yuh, Masters. That's what I come for. Say yore prayers!"

Perhaps deceived by her bandages and her invalid-like position in the big chair, Arnie Pilson was paying no heed to Janice Barkley. There was just a chance she would reach the carved-handled .38 that hung holstered on the wall.

With the swiftness of a streak of light Janice rose and snatched for her gun. Appraised by her movement, Arnie turned. Instantly Cal Masters leaped at him. Pilson's gun roared once, twice in the brief, fierce struggle. Then came the harsh thud of a gun barrel meeting skull. Sheriff Stearns darted close with his manacles. Hank Jastrow, alias Arnie Pilson, was a prisoner.

MASTERS rose, flushed and perspiring, but unhurt. "Sheriff," he grinned wanly, "that'll identify me." And he drew from his pocket a silver badge that made Stearns' eyes widen. "I'm an express company detective," Cal explained. "I've been after Hank nearly a year, and when I located him it seemed like a good idea to get a job near by.

"Say," he added to the three men, "would you mind steppin' outside, boys? Not now, Simms, he checked the fussy individual who had parted his lips to speak. "I'll talk to yuh about that later."

When the door closed behind them there was a short silence. "What is your real name?" Janice asked.

"Bob Lennington."

"Bob Lennington!" Her hazel eyes went round in astonishment. "Why—why, you own this spread! I—"

"Listen, Janice," he pleaded desperately. "I'm not a waster like you thought. Honest! I went through Ag. school an' then decided to learn ranchin' first hand. But I got on this express business, and it was fun. That fool lawyer, Simms, is houndin' me to take over the estate. But I haven't felt like settlin' down—er—until now."

"Oh!"

His eyes fell. The youth shifted uneasily. "Look here, yuh weren't in love with Pilson, were yuh?"

"N-no."

"But yuh are with me? Will yuh marry me, Janice?"

THE long silken lashes raised, then quickly lowered. "You know, Bob," she said slowly, and could not prevent a little smile from tugging at the corners of her alluring, kissable mouth, "I rather think I will. I'll marry you for your money."

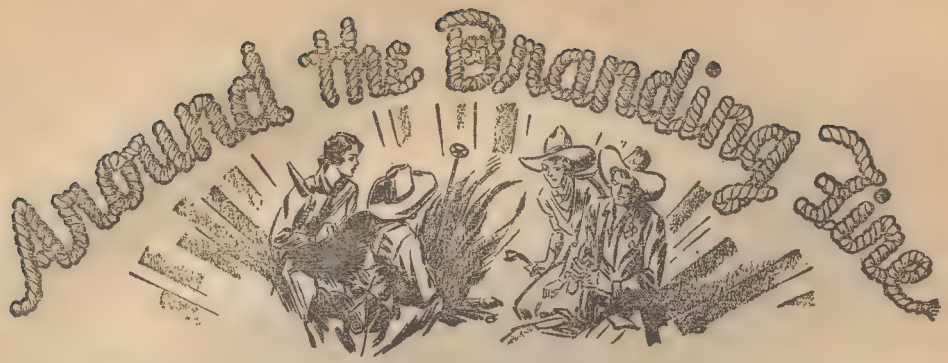
He came at once and knelt before her. In his eyes she read devotion, a depth of love that he could not express—yet also, a tinge of keen disappointment. In hers he read sly humor, but a fervent return of his affection, too.

"Why did yuh put it that way? When yuh really love me?" he whispered, his lips coming eagerly closer to hers.

"Because," Janice said with a low contralto laugh, "you will be marrying me to win fifty dollars from Nick Greer. It—it rather made me feel badly, Cal—Bob."

"Why, honey, that was just my scheme to get Nick to ask yuh to hire me! I wanted a job, but yuh didn't need a man. I called off that bet the same day I was hired! Why, Janice, honey," he told her in a low, ardent tone, "I wouldn't do that to yuh! I loved yuh first time I saw yuh!"

There was a short silence. "Bob, I don't believe I really minded the bet anyhow." Janice Barkley's hazel eyes became unutterably tender. "Because you were perfectly right, you know. You *could* make me love you. Why—you *have!*"



HOWDY, folks! Come on and find yourselves a seat around the BRANDING FIRE while old Uncle Tex Gainesville tells you what it's all about. And it's sure going to be good news for all of you, too.

Well, sir, I was in town making arrangements for the next rodeo when I suddenly found myself cut off from the herd and rounded up into a corner so as I couldn't duck my head or make a dash for the tall timber. So I finally settles down and gets my horns untangled from the lass rope and takes a look to see who was it that was cutting me out like he was gonna slap a brand on my side.

When I got a good look at him I recognized the hombre in spite of the fact he'd laid aside his goatskin chaps and his ten-gallon Stetson and his Colt .44 hogleg. You know who it was? I'll tell you.

A Great Big Surprise

It was the editor of this magazine. And I ain't been so surprised since that day the wild hogs almost ate up my little brother. You know why?

Because the last time I'd seen him was around a branding fire down on the Concho River down in Texas, where we was both raised. We was all a-sittin' and a-spinnin' yarns about what we'd be doin' for a livin' if we wasn't where we was.

And this hombre says, "Cow-punchin's all right and I like it fine, what with havin' been raised in the saddle and a-cuttin' my teeth on a brandin' iron, so to speak. But I got a yen to do somethin' else which is on my mind."

Somebody ups and ask him what he had—presumin' he had a mind—in it.

"Some day," he says, and looks kinda far off toward where you could see the North Star, "some o' these fine days I'm gonna publish a magazine of the *real* West. What this country needs right now ain't a good five-cent cigar, it's a good ten-cent Western magazine."

"Yeah? An' what you gonna do about it?" somebody shoots at him.

There's Romance in These Hills

"What?" he answers. "Just this. I'm gonna get together a bunch of Westerners that actually knows about the country they write about. Fellows that have lived here and have poked dogies and smelled a branding fire, and slept out under the stars, and broke wild bronchos that uncork like a ton o' dynamite.

"Fellers, there's romance out in these hills. People actually *live* in the cow country. It's just as alive today as it was when the old man drove his first herd into this here river bottom and courted my mother.

Those Pioneers Were Great

"And could she ride? And shoot? Boys," he said right serious, "you know, it was people like them

pioneers that made this country great like it is today. They was *real* people!"

"Long Dixie" Dugan twisted a cigarette. "What does that make you?" he asks, sticking a coal o' fire to his twistie.

"It makes me an editor," was the answer. "I'm gonna run a Western magazine like it ought to be run. Watch my smoke!"

So, as I was saying, I sure was surprised when he cut me out of the crowd and started talking.

"I got my magazine going," he says. "I got her tied with a pigging string, but before I get her broke to the saddle I'm gonna need some help—and you're elected."

Riding a Typewriter Is Tough

That kinda scared me off, and I shied like a colt at his first sight of a switch engine. "I don't know nothing about this here writing," I protested. "I couldn't ride one o' them typewriting machines if you blindfolded it and hogtied it down to a snubbing post. My game's promoting rodeos and organizing Western clubs and all that kind of stuff. I'm a kind of floating Western Social Secretary—and all that. My hair may be long but that don't make me a writer."

"You're tellin' me!" he says, showin' off his new Eastern slang. "That don't get you out of it; that's just what I'm lookin' for, and you're it. And don't make me have to drag you up to the office by your forelock."

Well, before I knew it I had my spurs hooked into the boss's new mahogany desk and was getting acquainted with all their plans. You should have heard 'em, and therefore you're gonna hear 'em. Because I took the job!

And Here's the Result

You're looking at the result—or part of the result—of the plans. A Western magazine with the romance of the West on every page. A magazine chock full of stories by the best writers in the Western field that ever stuck their brands on a yarn.

Look at those names. Robert Dale Denver! Who that ever read a Western yarn never heard of Bob. Everybody knows him. He lives on a thousand acre ranch—the one he has lived on all his life—and between roundups he pounds the old typewriter, passing on to you the actual experiences he and his friends have had out on the range.

Look at his story, ROMANCE RIDES THE TRAIL. I been proddin' dogies ever since I was knee-high to a heifer and I kinda think I know what the cow country smells like. And I been reading Western stories ever since I learned the alphabet reading brands on the side o' horses and cattle. But I don't think I ever read a story that took me back to the cow country any more than this one.

Boy, howdy! You can smell the sage. You can actually hear the thundering herd when it gets a whiff of water and lifts its tail and goes there! I'm a-tellin' yuh, you actually will get dust in your nose if you don't cover it with a bandanna. That's the real West, I calls it. I want you to write me and tell me whether you agree with me or not. More about that later, however.

Hell-Bent for a High Old Time

And look at those other Western names. Every one of them is a guarantee that you're a-gonna ride through the pages of RANCH STORIES hell-bent for a high old time.

Hard ridin', hard shootin' rannies, gun-hombres that deserve what they gets, a-fightin' every inch of the road in a blaze of gun smoke and glory.

Whoopee!

Traveling herds, a thousand head of restless steers, horns and hooves

a-clashin' and a-clickin' and a-poundin' up dust till yuh can't hardly breathe. Millin', shoutin' cowhands ridin' point and string, an' a-slappin' critters with the tails o' their lass ropes.

Gunsmoke and love!

The pages of THRILLING RANCH STORIES are packed tighter with drama than yearlin's in a shippin' corral.

Beautiful cow gals with cheeks the color of peaches, an' they ain't ever seen a lipstick. Girls who growed up in the saddle, the kind that lines up side by side with the men they loves, and fights their battles against all the odds that's piled up against them—in short—women worth fighting for!

Nights of love under a Western moon, in the clean pure air of the great open spaces where the stars are so clear it looks like you could just reach up and grab yourself a handful of them.

I'm a-tellin' yuh, it gives old Tex a thrill just to think about it. And the same thrill's a-comin' to you, too.

We're a-workin' and slavin' our heads off to make this the high-wide-and-handsomest magazine you ever got your hands on. But we don't mind it because we're a-doin' it for you.

SPEAK RIGHT UP IN MEETIN'

We want you-all to realize that this is *your* magazine! We know who the good writers are, we are gettin' 'em all corraled so we can get the kind of stories you-all want.

We *got* to satisfy you or we won't be satisfying ourselves. So, we've got to know what you-all like and what you don't like. WRITE AND TELL US!

Just speak right up in meetin'—*and tell us what you don't like!* Rear up on yore hind legs an' jump clean out'n the corral if you want to. If you like this yarn or that, shout it out!

And if you don't like it— dehorn us! We'll get yarns you do like next time! This here book is going to be what you want it to be if we have to break a surcingle to make it that way. So get on the job, all hands! Tell us right now what you got under that Stetson o' yores.

And here's the big news I been a-holdin' back till last. You ain't the only one that likes the West. Neither are we! There are thousands of others just like us, hundreds of thousands of others that has a hankerin' for the open spaces and the he-men and the lovely gals that lives on the plains.

GET ACQUAINTED, FOLKS!

You ought to know more of those people. We know you-all want to get acquainted, and as the editor says, that's where old Tex Gainesville gets his lass rope busy.

"You herd these-here folks together—make 'em acquainted. That's what you've been doing ever since you quit working for my old man for forty a month and food. Now get busy."

Well, he ain't the kind of a hombre that will take no for an answer so you see it's up to us to uncoil the old rawhide. We've got to organize!

He knows you folks are just a-rearin' to exchange letters with other folks if you only knew where they were and who they were. This is gonna be where they are, and when you see their letters come pourin' in you'll know who they are.

THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB

They'll all be right here in THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB! An', boy, howdy, will there be lots of 'em?

We're gonna publish all your letters just as fast as we can get around to it. It is gonna be first come, first served. In every issue

U. S. Double Action Revolver

A First Class Pocket Gun

$6.00 Or $9.00 if fitted with Pearl Handles. Shipped by Express Only. Can not go by parcel post.

Cartridges Adapted for these Revolvers

Made in 3 Sizes 22, 32 & 38 Cal.

THE U. S. is a double action Revolver that is made by one of the largest firearm factories in America, if not the world. It is made in three standard sizes—the popular 22 Caliber, firing seven shots, and using 22 caliber Rim Fire Cartridges; 32 caliber, firing five shots and using 32 caliber S. & W. Center fire Cartridges; and 38 caliber, firing five shots and using 38 caliber S. & W. Center Fire Cartridges. This revolver is constructed throughout of first class material, and has quick, smooth and positive action. Simply load the revolver with five or seven cartridges as the case may be, and you can fire as many well aimed shots in rapid succession, one after the other, just as fast as you can pull the trigger. The U. S. Double Action Revolver weighs little more than ten ounces, and is one of the lightest weight revolvers of its type on the market. It is an excellent house arm or pocket weapon.

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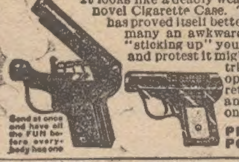

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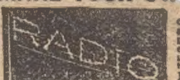

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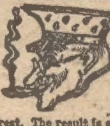

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